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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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DEATH OF A SPACEMAN

The manner in which a man has lived is often the key to the way he will die. Take old man Donegal, for example. Most of his adult life was spent in digging a hole through space to learn what was on the other side. Would he go out the same way?

Old Donegal was dying. They had all known it was coming, and they watched it come—his haggard wife, his daughter, and now his grandson, home on emergency leave from the pre-astronautics academy. Old Donegal knew it too, and had known it from the beginning, when he had begun to lose control of his legs and was forced to walk with a cane. But most of the time, he pretended to let them keep the secret they shared with the doctors—that the operations had all been failures, and that the cancer that fed at his spine would gnaw its way brainward until the paralysis engulfed vital organs, and then Old Donegal would cease to be. It would be cruel to let them know that he knew. Once, weeks ago, he had joked about the approaching shadows.

"Buy the plot back where people won't walk over it, Martha," he said. "Get it way back under the cedars—next to the fence. There aren't many graves back there yet. I want to be alone."

"Don't *talk* that way, Donny!" his wife had choked. "You're not dying."

His eyes twinkled maliciously. "Listen, Martha, I want to be buried face-down. I want to be buried with my back to space, understand? Don't let them lay me out like a lily."

"Donny, *please*!"

"They oughta face a man the way he's headed," Donegal grunted. "I been up—*way* up. Now I'm going straight down."

Martha had fled from the room in tears. He had never done it again, except to the interns and nurses, who, while they insisted that he was going to get well, didn't mind joking with him about it.

Martha can bear my death, he thought, can bear pre-knowledge of it. But she couldn't bear thinking that he might take it calmly. If he accepted death gracefully, it would be like deliberately leaving her, and Old Donegal had decided to help her believe whatever would be comforting to her in such a troublesome moment.

"When'll they let me out of this bed again?" he complained.

"Be patient, Donny," she sighed. "It won't be long. You'll be up and around before you know it."

"Back on the moon-run, maybe?" he offered. "Listen, Martha, I been planet-bound too long. I'm not too old for the moon-run, am I? Sixty-three's not so old."

That had been carrying things too far. She knew he was hoaxing, and dabbed at her eyes again. The dead must humor the mourners, he thought, and the sick must comfort the visitors. It was always so.

But it was harder, now that the end was near. His eyes were hazy, and his thoughts unclear. He could move his arms a little, clumsily, but feeling was gone from them. The rest of his body was lost to him. Sometimes he seemed to feel his stomach and his hips, but the sensation was mostly an illusion offered by higher nervous centers, like the "ghost-arm" that an amputee continues to feel. The wires were down, and he was cut off from himself.

He lay wheezing on the hospital bed, in his own room, in his own rented flat. Gaunt and unshaven, gray as winter twilight, he lay staring at the white net curtains that billowed gently in the breeze from the open window. There was no sound in the room but the sound of breathing and the loud ticking of an alarm clock. Occasionally he heard a chair scraping on the stone terrace next door, and the low mutter of voices, sometimes laughter, as the servants of the Keith mansion arranged the terrace for late afternoon guests.

With considerable effort, he rolled his head toward Martha who sat beside the bed, pinch-faced and weary.

"You ought to get some sleep," he said.

"I slept yesterday. Don't talk, Donny. It tires you."

"You ought to get more sleep. You never sleep enough. Are you afraid I'll get up and run away if you go to sleep for a while?"

She managed a brittle smile. "There'll be plenty of time for sleep when ... when you're well again." The brittle smile fled and she swallowed hard, like swallowing a fish-bone. He glanced down, and noticed that she was squeezing his hand spasmodically.

There wasn't much left of the hand, he thought. Bones and ugly tight-stretched hide spotted with brown. Bulging knuckles with yellow cigaret stains. My hand. He tried to tighten it, tried to squeeze Martha's thin one in return. He watched it open and contract a little, but it was like operating a remote-control mechanism. Goodbye, hand, you're leaving me the way my legs did, he told it. I'll see you again in hell. How hammy can you get, Old Donegal? You maudlin ass.

"Requiescat," he muttered over the hand, and let it lie in peace.

Perhaps she heard him. "Donny," she whispered, leaning closer, "won't you let me call the priest now? Please."

He rattled a sigh and rolled his head toward the window again. "Are the Keiths having a party today?" he asked. "Sounds like they're moving chairs out on the terrace."

"Please, Donny, the priest?"

He let his head roll aside and closed his eyes, as if asleep. The bed shook slightly as she quickly caught at his wrist to feel for a pulse.

"If I'm not dying, I don't need a priest," he said sleepily.

"That's not right," she scolded softly. "You know that's not right, Donny. You know better."

Maybe I'm being too rough on her? he wondered. He hadn't minded getting baptized her way, and married her way, and occasionally priest-handled the way she wanted him to when he was home from a space-run, but when it came to dying, Old Donegal wanted to do it his own way.

He opened his eyes at the sound of a bench being dragged across the stone terrace. "Martha, what kind of a party are the Keiths having today?"

"I wouldn't know," she said stiffly. "You'd think they'd have a little more respect. You'd think they'd put it off a few days."

"Until—?"

"Until you feel better."

"I feel fine, Martha. I like parties. I'm glad they're having one. Pour me a drink, will you? I can't reach the bottle anymore."

"It's empty."

"No, it isn't, Martha, it's still a quarter full. I know. I've been watching it."

"You shouldn't have it, Donny. Please don't."

"But this is a party, Martha. Besides, the doctor says I can have whatever I want. Whatever I want, you hear? That means I'm getting well, doesn't it?"

"Sure, Donny, sure. Getting well."

"The whiskey, Martha. Just a finger in a tumbler, no more. I want to feel like it's a party."

Her throat was rigid as she poured it. She helped him get the tumbler to his mouth. The liquor seared his throat, and he gagged a little as the fumes clogged his nose. Good whiskey, the best—but he couldn't take it any more. He eyed the green stamp on the neck of the bottle on the bed-table and grinned. He hadn't had whiskey like that since his space-days. Couldn't afford it now, not on a blastman's pension.

He remembered how he and Caid used to smuggle a couple of fifths aboard for the moon-run. If they caught you, it meant suspension, but there was no harm

in it, not for the blastroom men who had nothing much to do from the time the ship acquired enough velocity for the long, long coaster ride until they started the rockets again for Lunar landing. You could drink a fifth, jettison the bottle through the trash lock, and sober up before you were needed again. It was the only way to pass the time in the cramped cubicle, unless you ruined your eyes trying to read by the glow-lamps. Old Donegal chuckled. If he and Caid had stayed on the run, Earth would have a ring by now, like Saturn—a ring of Old Granddad bottles.

"You said it, Donny-boy," said the misty man by the billowing curtains. "Who else knows the gegenschein is broken glass?"

Donegal laughed. Then he wondered what the man was doing there. The man was lounging against the window, and his unzipped space rig draped about him in an old familiar way. Loose plug-in connections and hose-ends dangled about his lean body. He was freckled and grinning.

"Caid," Old Donegal breathed softly.

"What did you say, Donny?" Martha answered.

Old Donegal blinked hard and shook his head. Something let go with a soggy snap, and the misty man was gone. I'd better take it easy on the whiskey, he thought. You got to wait, Donegal, old lush, until Nora and Ken get here. You can't get drunk until they're gone, or you might get them mixed up with memories like Caid's.

Car doors slammed in the street below. Martha glanced toward the window.

"Think it's them? I wish they'd get here. I wish they'd hurry."

Martha arose and tiptoed to the window. She peered down toward the sidewalk, put on a sharp frown. He heard a distant mutter of voices and occasional laughter, with group-footsteps milling about on the sidewalk. Martha murmured her disapproval and closed the window.

"Leave it open," he said.

"But the Keiths' guests are starting to come. There'll be such a racket." She looked at him hopefully, the way she did when she prompted his manners before company came.

Maybe it wasn't decent to listen in on a party when you were dying, he thought. But that wasn't the reason. Donegal, your chamber-pressure's dropping off. Your brains are in your butt-end, where a spacer's brains belong, but your butt-end died last month. She wants the window closed for her own sake, not yours.

"Leave it closed," he grunted. "But open it again before the moon-run blasts off. I want to listen."

She smiled and nodded, glancing at the clock. "It'll be an hour and a half yet. I'll watch the time."

"I hate that clock. I wish you'd throw it out. It's loud."

"It's your medicine-clock, Donny." She came back to sit down at his bedside again. She sat in silence. The clock filled the room with its clicking pulse.

"What time are they coming?" he asked.

"Nora and Ken? They'll be here soon. Don't fret."

"Why should I fret?" He chuckled. "That boy—he'll be a good spacer, won't he, Martha?"

Martha said nothing, fanned at a fly that crawled across his pillow. The fly buzzed up in an angry spiral and alighted on the ceiling. Donegal watched it for a time. The fly had natural-born space-legs. I know your tricks, he told it with a smile, and I learned to walk on the bottomside of things before you were a maggot. You stand there with your magnasoles hanging to the hull, and the rest of you's in free fall. You jerk a sole loose, and your knee flies up to your belly, and reaction spins you half-around and near throws your other hip out of joint if you don't jam the foot down fast and jerk up the other. It's worse'n trying to run through knee-deep mud with snow-shoes, and a man'll go nuts trying to keep his arms and legs from taking off in odd directions. I know your tricks, fly. But the fly was born with his magnasoles, and he trotted across the ceiling like Donegal never could.

"That boy Ken—he ought to make a damn good space-engineer," wheezed the old man.

Her silence was long, and he rolled his head toward her again. Her lips tight, she stared down at the palm of his hand, unfolded his bony fingers, felt the cracked calluses that still welted the shrunken skin, calluses worn there by the linings of space gauntlets and the handles of fuel valves, and the rungs of get-about ladders during free fall.

"I don't know if I should tell you," she said.

"Tell me what, Martha?"

She looked up slowly, scrutinizing his face. "Ken's changed his mind, Nora says. Ken doesn't like the academy. She says he wants to go to medical school."

Old Donegal thought it over, nodded absently. "That's fine. Space-medics get good pay." He watched her carefully.

She lowered her eyes, rubbed at his calluses again. She shook her head slowly. "He doesn't want to go to space."

The clock clicked loudly in the closed room.

"I thought I ought to tell you, so you won't say anything to him about it," she added.

Old Donegal looked grayer than before. After a long silence, he rolled his head away and looked toward the limp curtains.

"Open the window, Martha," he said.

Her tongue clucked faintly as she started to protest, but she said nothing. After frozen seconds, she sighed and went to open it. The curtains billowed, and a babble of conversation blew in from the terrace of the Keith mansion. With the sound came the occasional brassy discord of a musician tuning his instrument. She clutched the window-sash as if she wished to slam it closed again.

"Well! Music!" grunted Old Donegal. "That's good. This is some shebang. Good whiskey and good music and you." He chuckled, but it choked off into a fit of coughing.

"Donny, about Ken—"

"No matter, Martha," he said hastily. "Space-medic's pay is good."

"But, Donny—" She turned from the window, stared at him briefly, then said, "Sure, Donny, sure," and came back to sit down by his bed.

He smiled at her affectionately. She was a man's woman, was Martha—always had been, still was. He had married her the year he had gone to space—a lissome, wistful, old-fashioned lass, with big violet eyes and gentle hands and gentle thoughts—and she had never complained about the long and lonely weeks between blast-off and glide-down, when most spacers' wives listened to the psychiatrists and soap-operas and soon developed the symptoms that were expected of them, either because the symptoms were *chic*, or because they felt they should do something to earn the pity that was extended to them. "It's not so bad," Martha had assured him. "The house keeps me busy till Nora's home from school, and then there's a flock of kids around till dinner. Nights are a little empty, but if there's a moon, I can always go out on the porch and look at it and know where you are. And Nora gets out the telescope you built her, and we make a game of it. 'Seeing if Daddy's still at the office,' she calls it."

"Those were the days," he muttered.

"What, Donny?"

"Do you remember that Steve Farran song?"

She paused, frowning thoughtfully. There were a lot of Steve Farran songs, but after a moment she picked the right one, and sang it softly ...

"O moon whereo'er the clouds fly,
Beyond the willow tree,
There is a ramblin' space guy
I wish you'd save for me.
"*Mare Tranquillitatis*,
O dark and tranquil sea,
Until he drops from heaven,
Rest him there with thee ..."

Her voice cracked, and she laughed. Old Donegal chuckled weakly.

"Fried mush," he said. "That one made the cats wilt their ears and wail at the moon.

"I feel real crazy," he added. "Hand me the king kong, fluff-muff."

"Keep cool, Daddy-O, you've had enough." Martha reddened and patted his arm, looking pleased. Neither of them had talked that way, even in the old days, but the out-dated slang brought back memories—school parties, dances at the Rocketport Club, the early years of the war when Donegal had jockeyed an R-43 fighter in the close-space assaults against the Soviet satellite project. The memories were good.

A brassy blare of modern "slide" arose suddenly from the Keith terrace as the small orchestra launched into its first number. Martha caught an angry breath and started toward the window.

"Leave it," he said. "It's a party. Whiskey, Martha. Please—just a small one."

She gave him a hurtful glance.

"Whiskey. Then you can call the priest."

"Donny, it's not right. You know it's not right—to bargain for such as that."

"All right. Whiskey. Forget the priest."

She poured it for him, and helped him get it down, and then went out to make the phone-call. Old Donegal lay shuddering over the whiskey taste and savoring the burn in his throat. Jesus, but it was good.

You old bastard, he thought, you got no right to enjoy life when nine-tenths of you is dead already, and the rest is foggy as a thermal dust-rise on the lunar maria at hell-dawn. But it wasn't a bad way to die. It ate your consciousness away from the feet up; it gnawed away the Present, but it let you keep the Past, until everything faded and blended. Maybe that's what Eternity was, he thought—one man's subjective Past, all wrapped up and packaged for shipment, a single space-time entity, a one-man microcosm of memories, when nothing else remains.

"If I've got a soul, I made it myself," he told the gray nun at the foot of his bed.

The nun held out a pie pan, rattled a few coins in it. "Contribute to the Radiation Victims' Relief?" the nun purred softly.

"I know you," he said. "You're my conscience. You hang around the officers' mess, and when we get back from a sortie, you make us pay for the damage we did. But that was forty years ago."

The nun smiled, and her luminous eyes were on him softly. "Mother of God!" he breathed, and reached for the whiskey. His arm obeyed. The last drink had done him good. He had to watch his hand to see where it was going, and squeezed the neck until his fingers whitened so that he knew that he had it, but he got it off the table and onto his chest, and he got the cork out with his teeth. He had a long

pull at the bottle, and it made his eyes water and his hands grow weak. But he got it back to the table without spilling a bit, and he was proud of himself.

The room was spinning like the cabin of a gyro-gravved ship. By the time he wrestled it to a standstill, the nun was gone. The blare of music from the Keith terrace was louder, and laughing voices blended with it. Chairs scraping and glasses rattling. A fine party, Keith, I'm glad you picked today. This shebang would be the younger Keith's affair. Ronald Tonwyler Keith, III, scion of Orbital Engineering and Construction Company—builders of the moon-shuttle ships that made the run from the satellite station to Luna and back.

It's good to have such important neighbors, he thought. He wished he had been able to meet them while he was still up and about. But the Keiths' place was walled-in, and when a Keith came out, he charged out in a limousine with a chauffeur at the wheel, and the iron gate closed again. The Keiths built the wall when the surrounding neighborhood began to grow shabby with age. It had once been the best of neighborhoods, but that was before Old Donegal lived in it. Now it consisted of sooty old houses and rented flats, and the Keith place was really not a part of it anymore. Nevertheless, it was really something when a pensioned blastman could say, "I live out close to the Keiths—you know, the *Ronald* Keiths." At least, that's what Martha always told him.

The music was so loud that he never heard the doorbell ring, but when a lull came, he heard Nora's voice downstairs, and listened hopefully for Ken's. But when they came up, the boy was not with them.

"Hello, skinny-britches," he greeted his daughter.

Nora grinned and came over to kiss him. Her hair dangled about his face, and he noticed that it was blacker than usual, with the gray streaks gone from it again.

"You smell good," he said.

"You don't, Pops. You smell like a sot. Naughty!"

"Where's Ken?"

She moistened her lips nervously and looked away. "He couldn't come. He had to take a driver's lesson. He really couldn't help it. If he didn't go, he'd lose his turn, and then he wouldn't finish before he goes back to the academy." She looked at him apologetically.

"It's all right, Nora."

"If he missed it, he wouldn't get his copter license until summer."

"It's okay. Copters! Hell, the boy should be in jets by now!"

Several breaths passed in silence. She gazed absently toward the window and shook her head. "No jets, Pop. Not for Ken."

He glowered at her. "Listen! How'll he get into space? He's got to get his jet

licenses first. Can't get in rockets without 'em."

Nora shot a quick glance at her mother. Martha rolled her eyes as if sighing patiently. Nora went to the window to stare down toward the Keith terrace. She tucked a cigaret between scarlet lips, lit it, blew nervous smoke against the pane.

"Mom, can't you call them and have that racket stopped?"

"Donny says he likes it."

Nora's eyes flitted over the scene below. "Female butterflies and puppy-dogs in sport jackets. And the cadets." She snorted. "Cadets! Imagine Ron Keith the Third ever going to space. The old man buys his way into the academy, and they throw a brawl as if Ronny passed the Compets."

"Maybe he did," growled Old Donegal.

"Hah!"

"They live in a different world, I guess," Martha sighed.

"If it weren't for men like Pops, they'd never've made their fortune."

"I like the music, I tell you," grumbled the old man.

"I'm half-a-mind to go over there and tell them off," Nora murmured.

"Let them alone. Just so they'll stop the racket for blast-away."

"Look at them!—polite little pattern-cuts, all alike. They take pre-space, because it's the thing to do. Then they quit before the pay-off comes."

"How do you know they'll quit?"

"That party—I bet it cost six months' pay, spacer's pay," she went on, ignoring him. "And what do real spacers get? Oley gets killed, and Pop's pension wouldn't feed the Keiths' cat."

"You don't understand, girl."

"I lost Oley. I understand enough."

He watched her silently for a moment, then closed his eyes. It was no good trying to explain, no good trying to tell her the dough didn't mean a damn thing. She'd been a spacer's wife, and that was bad enough, but now she was a spacer's widow. And Oley? Oley's tomb revolved around the sun in an eccentric orbit that spun-in close to Mercury, then reached out into the asteroid belt, once every 725 days. When it came within rocket radius of Earth, it whizzed past at close to fifteen miles a second.

You don't rescue a ship like that, skinny-britches, my darling daughter. Nor do you salvage it after the crew stops screaming for help. If you use enough fuel to catch it, you won't get back. You just leave such a ship there forever, like an asteroid, and it's a damn shame about the men trapped aboard. Heroes all, no doubt—but the smallness of the widow's monthly check failed to confirm the heroism, and Nora was bitter about the price of Oley's memory, perhaps.

Ouch! Old Donegal, you know she's not like that. It's just that she can't understand about space. You ought to make her understand.

But did he really understand himself? You ride hot in a roaring blastroom, hands tense on the mixer controls and the pumps, eyes glued to instruments, body sucked down in a four-gravity thrust, and wait for the command to choke it off. Then you float free and weightless in a long nightmare as the beast coasts moonward, a flung javelin.

The "romance" of space—drivel written in the old days. When you're not blasting, you float in a cramped hotbox, crawl through dirty mazes of greasy pipe and cable to tighten a lug, scratch your arms and bark your shins, get sick and choked up because no gravity helps your gullet get the food down. Liquid is worse, but you gag your whiskey down because you have to.

Stars?—you see stars by squinting through a viewing lens, and it's like a photo-transparency, and if you aren't careful, you'll get an eyeful of Old Blinder and back off with a punch-drunk retina.

Adventure?—unless the skipper calls for course-correction, you float around in the blast-cubicle with damn little to do between blast-away and moon-down, except sweat out the omniscient accident statistics. If the beast blows up or gets gutted in space, a statistic had your name on it, that's all, and there's no fighting back. You stay outwardly sane because you're a hog for punishment; if you weren't, you'd never get past the psychologists.

"Did you like horror movies when you were a kid?" asked the psych. And you'd damn well better answer "yes," if you want to go to space.

Tell her, old man, you're her pop. Tell her why it's worth it, if you know. You jail yourself in a coffin-size cubicle, and a crazy beast thunders berserk for uncontrollable seconds, and then you soar in ominous silence for the long, long hours. Grow sweaty, filthy, sick, miserable, idle—somewhere out in Big Empty, where Man's got no business except the trouble he always makes for himself wherever he goes. Tell her why it's worth it, for pay less than a good bricklayer's. Tell her why Oley would do it again.

"It's a sucker's run, Nora," he said. "You go looking for kicks, but the only kicks you get to keep is what Oley got. God knows why—but it's worth it."

Nora said nothing. He opened his eyes slowly. Nora was gone. Had she been there at all?

He blinked around at the fuzzy room, and dissolved the shifting shadows that sometimes emerged as old friendly faces, grinning at him. He found Martha.

"You went to sleep," said Martha. "She had to go. Kennie called. He'll be over later, if you're not too tired."

"I'm not tired. I'm all head. There's nothing much to get tired."

"I love you, Old Donegal."

"Hold my hand again."

"I'm holding it, old man."

"Then hold me where I can feel it."

She slid a thin arm under his neck, and bent over his face to kiss him. She was crying a little, and he was glad she could do it now without fleeing the room.

"Can I talk about dying now?" he wondered aloud.

She pinched her lips together and shook her head.

"I lie to myself, Martha. You know how much I lie to myself?"

She nodded slowly and stroked his gray temples.

"I lie to myself about Ken, and about dying. If Ken turned spacer, I wouldn't die—that's what I told myself. You know?"

She shook her head. "Don't talk, Donny, please."

"A man makes his own soul, Martha."

"That's not true. You shouldn't say things like that."

"A man makes his own soul, but it dies with him, unless he can pour it into his kids and his grandchildren before he goes. I lied to myself. Ken's a yellow-belly. Nora made him one, and the boots won't fit."

"Don't, Donny. You'll excite yourself again."

"I was going to give him the boots—the over-boots with magnasoles. But they won't fit him. They won't ever fit him. He's a lily-livered lap-dog, and he whines. Bring me my boots, woman."

"Donny!"

"The boots, they're in my locker in the attic. I want them."

"What on earth!"

"Bring me my goddam space boots and put them on my feet. I'm going to wear them."

"You can't; the priest's coming."

"Well, get them anyway. What time is it? You didn't let me sleep through the moon-run blast, did you?"

She shook her head. "It's half an hour yet ... I'll get the boots if you promise not to make me put them on you."

"I want them on."

"You can't, until Father Paul's finished."

"Do I have to get my feet buttered?"

She sighed. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that. I wish you wouldn't, Donny. It's sacrilege, you know it is."

"All right—'anointed'," he corrected wearily.

"Yes, you do."

"The boots, woman, the boots."

She went to get them. While she was gone, the doorbell rang, and he heard her quick footsteps on the stairs, and then Father Paul's voice asking about the patient. Old Donegal groaned inwardly. After the priest, the doctor would come, at the usual time, to see if he were dead yet. The doctor had let him come home from the hospital to die, and the doctor was getting impatient. Why don't they let me alone? he growled. Why don't they let me handle it in my own way, and stop making a fuss over it? I can die and do a good job of it without a lot of outside interference, and I wish they'd quit picking at me with syringes and sacraments and enemas. All he wanted was a chance to listen to the orchestra on the Keith terrace, to drink the rest of his whiskey, and to hear the beast blast-away for the satellite on the first lap of the run to Luna.

It's going to be my last day, he thought. My eyes are going fuzzy, and I can't breathe right, and the throbbing's hurting my head. Whether he lived through the night wouldn't matter, because delirium was coming over him, and then there would be the coma, and the symbolic fight to keep him pumping and panting. I'd rather die tonight and get it over with, he thought, but they probably won't let me go.

He heard their voices coming up the stairs ...

"Nora tried to get them to stop it, Father, but she couldn't get in to see anybody but the butler. He told her he'd tell Mrs. Keith, but nothing happened. It's just as loud as before."

"Well, as long as Donny doesn't mind—"

"He just says that. You know how he is."

"What're they celebrating, Martha?"

"Young Ronald's leaving—for pre-space training. It's a going-away affair." They paused in the doorway. The small priest smiled in at Donegal and nodded. He set his black bag on the floor inside, winked solemnly at the patient.

"I'll leave you two alone," said Martha. She closed the door and her footsteps wandered off down the hall.

Donegal and the young priest eyed each other warily.

"You look like hell, Donegal," the padre offered jovially. "Feeling nasty?"

"Skip the small talk. Let's get this routine over with."

The priest humphed thoughtfully, sauntered across to the bed, gazed down at the old man disinterestedly. "What's the matter? Don't want the 'routine'? Rather play it tough?"

"What's the difference?" he growled. "Hurry up and get out. I want to hear

the beast blast off.''

''You won't be able to,'' said the priest, glancing at the window, now closed again. ''That's quite a racket next door.''

''They'd better stop for it. They'd better quiet down for it. They'll have to turn it off for five minutes or so.''

''Maybe they won't.''

It was a new idea, and it frightened him. He liked the music, and the party's gaiety, the nearness of youth and good times—but it hadn't occurred to him that it wouldn't stop so he could hear the beast.

''Don't get upset, Donegal. You know what a blast-off sounds like.''

''But it's the last one. The last time. I want to hear.''

''How do you know it's the last time?''

''Hell, don't I know when I'm kicking off?''

''Maybe, maybe not. It's hardly your decision.''

''It's not, eh?'' Old Donegal fumed. ''Well, bigawd you'd think it wasn't. You'd think it was Martha's and yours and that damfool medic's. You'd think I got no say-so. Who's doing it anyway?''

''I would guess,'' Father Paul grunted sourly, ''that Providence might appreciate His fair share of the credit.''

Old Donegal made a surly noise and hunched his head back into the pillow to glower.

''You want me?'' the priest asked. ''Or is this just a case of wifely conscience?''

''What's the difference? Give me the business and scram.''

''No soap. Do you want the sacrament, or are you just being kind to your wife? If it's for Martha, I'll go *now*.''

Old Donegal glared at him for a time, then wilted. The priest brought his bag to the bedside.

''Bless me, father, for I have sinned.''

''Bless you, son.''

''I accuse myself ...''

Tension, anger, helplessness—they had piled up on him, and now he was feeling the after-effects. Vertigo, nausea, and the black confetti—a bad spell. The whiskey—if he could only reach the whiskey. Then he remembered he was receiving a Sacrament, and struggled to get on with it. Tell him, old man, tell him of your various rottennesses and vile transgressions, if you can remember some. A sin is whatever you're sorry for, maybe. But Old Donegal, you're sorry for the wrong things, and this young jesuitical gadget wouldn't like listening to it. I'm sorry I didn't get it instead of Oley, and I'm sorry I fought in the war, and I'm sorry

I can't get out of this bed and take a belt to my daughter's backside for making a puny whelp out of Ken, and I'm sorry I gave Martha such a rough time all these years—and wound up dying in a cheap flat, instead of giving her things like the Keiths had. I wish I had been a sharpster, contractor, or thief ... instead of a common laboring spacer, whose species lost its glamor after the war.

Listen, old man, you made your soul yourself, and it's yours. This young dispenser of oils, substances, and mysteries wishes only to help you scrape off the rough edges and gouge out the bad spots. He will not steal it, nor distort it with his supernatural chisels, nor make fun of it. He can take nothing away, but only cauterize and neutralize, he says, so why not let him try? Tell him the rotten messes.

"Are you finished, my son?"

Old Donegal nodded wearily, and said what he was asked to say, and heard the soft mutter of Latin that washed him inside and behind his ghostly ears ... *ego te absolvo in Nomine Patris* ... and he accepted the rest of it lying quietly in the candlelight and the red glow of the sunset through the window, while the priest anointed him and gave him bread, and read the words of the soul in greeting its spouse: "I was asleep, but my heart waked; it is the voice of my beloved calling: come to me my love, my dove, my undefiled ..." and from beyond the closed window came the sarcastic wail of a clarinet painting hot slides against a rhythmic background.

It wasn't so bad, Old Donegal thought when the priest was done. He felt like a schoolboy in a starched shirt on Sunday morning, and it wasn't a bad feeling, though it left him weak.

The priest opened the window for him again, and repacked his bag. "Ten minutes till blast-off," he said. "I'll see what I can do about the racket next door."

When he was gone, Martha came back in, and he looked at her face and was glad. She was smiling when she kissed him, and she looked less tired.

"Is it all right for me to die now?" he grunted.

"Donny, don't start that again."

"Where's the boots? You promised to bring them?"

"They're in the hall. Donny, you don't want them."

"I want them, and I want a drink of whiskey, and I want to hear them fire the beast." He said it slow and hard, and he left no room for argument.

When she had got the huge boots over his shrunken feet, the magnasoles clanged against the iron bedframe and clung there, and she rolled him up so that he could look at them, and Old Donegal chuckled inside. He felt warm and clean and pleasantly dizzy.

"The whiskey, Martha, and for God's sake, make them stop the noise till after the firing. Please!"

She went to the window and looked out for a long time. Then she came back and poured him an insignificant drink.

"Well?"

"I don't know," she said. "I saw Father Paul on the terrace, talking to somebody."

"Is it time?"

She glanced at the clock, looked at him doubtfully, and nodded. "Nearly time."

The orchestra finished a number, but the babble of laughing voices continued. Old Donegal sagged. "They won't do it. They're the Keiths, Martha. Why should I ruin their party?"

She turned to stare at him, slowly shook her head. He heard someone shouting, but then a trumpet started softly, introducing a new number. Martha sucked in a hurt breath, pressed her hands together, and hurried from the room.

"It's too late," he said after her.

Her footsteps stopped on the stairs. The trumpet was alone. Donegal listened; and there was no babble of voices, and the rest of the orchestra was silent. Only the trumpet sang—and it puzzled him, hearing the same slow bugle-notes of the call played at the lowering of the colors.

The trumpet stopped suddenly. Then he knew it had been for him.

A brief hush—then thunder came from the blast-station two miles to the west. First the low reverberation, rattling the windows, then the rising growl as the sleek beast knifed skyward on a column of blue-white hell. It grew and grew until it drowned the distant traffic sounds and dominated the silence outside.

Quit crying, you old fool, you maudlin ass ...

"My boots," he whispered, "my boots ... please ..."

"You've got them on, Donny."

He sank quietly then. He closed his eyes and let his heart go up with the beast, and he sank into the gravity padding of the blastroom, and Caid was with him, and Oley. And when Ronald Keith, III, instructed the orchestra to play Blastroom Man, after the beast's rumble had waned, Old Donegal was on his last moon-run, and he was grinning. He'd had a good day.

Martha went to the window to stare out at the thin black trail that curled starward above the blast-station through the twilight sky. Guests on the terrace were watching it too.

The doorbell rang. That would be Ken, too late. She closed the window against the chill breeze, and went back to the bed. The boots, the heavy, clumsy boots—they clung to the bedframe, with his feet half out of them. She took them off gently and set them out of company's sight. Then she went to answer the door.

FAR FROM HOME

"Far" is strictly a relative term. Half a world away from home is, sometimes, no distance at all!

Someone must have talked over the fence because the newshounds were clamoring on the trail within an hour after it happened.

The harassed Controller had lived in an aura of "Restricteds," "Classifieds" and "Top Secrets" for so long it had become a mental conditioning and automatically hedged over information that had been public property for years via the popular technical mags; but in time they pried from him an admittance that the Station Service Lift rocket A. J. "Able Jake" Four had indeed failed to rendezvous with Space Station One, due at 9:16 Greenwich that morning.

The initial take-off and ascent had gone to flight plan and the pilot, in the routine check-back after entering free flight had reported no motor or control faults. At this point, unfortunately, a fault in the tracking radar transmitter had resulted in it losing contact with the target. The Controller did not, however, mention the defection of the hungover operator in fouling up the signal to the standby unit, or the consequent general confusion in the tracking network with no contact at all thereafter, and fervently hoped that gentlemen of the press were not too familiar with the organization of the tracking system.

At least one of the more shrewd looking reporters appeared as though he were mentally baiting a large trap so the Controller, throwing caution to the winds, plunged headlong into a violent refutal of various erroneous reports already common in the streets.

Able Jake did not carry explosives or highly corrosive chemicals, only some Waste Disposal cylinders, dry foodstuffs and sundry Station Household supplies.

Furthermore there was no truth in the oft-revived rumors of weaknesses in the so-called "spine-and-rib" construction of the Baur and Hammond Type Three vessel under acceleration strain. The type had been discontinued solely because the rather complicated structure raised certain stowage difficulties in service with overlong turnabout times resulting.

There may have been a collision with a meteor he conceded, but, it was thought, highly unlikely. And now, the urgent business of the search called, the Controller escaped, perspiring gently.

Able Jake was sighted a few minutes later but it was another three hours before a service ship could be readied and got away without load to allow it as much operating margin as possible. Getting a man aboard was yet another matter. At this stage of space travel no maneuver of this nature had ever been accomplished outside of theory. Fuel-thrust-mass ratios were still a thing of pretty close reckoning, and the service lift ships were simply not built for it.

The ship was in an elliptical orbit and a full degree off its normal course. A large part of the control room was demolished and there was a lengthy split in the hull. There was no sign of the pilot and some of the cargo was missing also. The investigating crew assumed the obvious and gave it as their opinion that the pilot had been literally disintegrated by the intense heat of the collision.

The larger part of the world's population made it a point to listen in on the first space burial service in history over the absent remains of Johnny Melland.

Such a small thing to cause such a fury. A mere twenty Earth pounds of an indifferent grade of rock and a little iron, an irregular, ungraceful lump, spawned somewhere a billion years before as a star died. But it still had most of the awesome velocity and inertia of its birth.

Able Jake, with the controlling influence of the jets cut, had yawed slightly and was now traveling crabwise. The meteor on its own course, a trifle oblique to that of the ship, struck almost directly the slender spring steel spine, the frightful energy of the impact transmuted on the instant into a heat that vaporized several feet of the nose and spine before the dying shock caused an anguished flexing of the ship's backbone; thrust violently outward along the radial members and so against the ribs and hull sheathing on that side. Able Jake's hull split open like a pea pod for fully half its length and several items of its cargo burst from their lashings, erupted from the wound.

Johnny was not inboard at the time, but floating, spacesuited alongside, freeing a fouled lead to the radar bowl, swearing occasionally but without any real passion at the stupidity of the unknown maintenance man who failed to secure it properly. For some odd reason he had never quite lost the thrill of his first trip "outside," and, donning pressure suit with the speed of long practice, sneaked as many "inspections" as possible, with or without due cause.

The second's fury that reduced the third stage of a $5,000,000 rocket to junk was evident to him only as a brilliant blue-white flash, a hammer-like shock through the antennae support that left his wrist and forearm numb. Then a violent wrench as a long cylinder, expelled from the split hull, caught the loop of his life line and dragged him in till he clashed hard against it, the suddenly increased tension or a

sharp edge parting the line close to the anchored end. He clawed blindly for a hold, found something he could not at that moment identify and hung on.

For a short time his vision seemed dulled and that part of his mind, trained to the quick analysis of sudden situations groped but feebly through a haze of shock to understand what had happened. Orienting himself he found he was gripping a brace of the open-mounted motor on one of the Waste Disposal Cylinders. About him he could see other odd items of the cargo, some clustering fairly closely, others just perceptibly drifting farther away. To one side, or "downwards" the Earth rolling vastly, pole over pole, and with her own natural rotation giving an odd illusion of slipping sideways from under him.

Only a sudden sun glint on the stubby swept-back wings showed him where Able Jake was. Far away—too far, spinning slowly end over end. His sideways expulsion from the ship then had been enough to give him and his companion debris a divergent course.

Spacemen accept without question the fact of a ship or a station always at hand with a safety man on watch at all times over those outside and a "bug" within signaling distance constantly. They do not conceive of any other state of affairs.

Now Johnny had to face the fact that he was in such a position—entirely and utterly alone, except for the useless flotsam that came with him. He might have flung himself into a mad chase after the ship on his suit jets except that the thought of leaving his little island, cold comfort though it was, to plunge into those totally empty depths was suddenly horrible.

The tide of panic rose within him. He knew the sickening bodily revolt of blind unreasoning terror—the terror of the lost, the terror of certain untimely death, but mostly of death so dreadfully alone.

He might have gone insane. In the face of the insoluble problem his mind might have retreated into a shadow world of its own, perhaps to prattle happily the last few hours away. But there was something else there. The pre-flight school psychiatrist had recognized it, Johnny himself probably wouldn't have and it wasn't their policy to tell him. It saved him. The labored heart pounding and the long shuddering gasps slowed in time and with the easing of his physical distress he found enough heart to muster a wry little smile at the thought that of the castaways of history he at least stood fair to be named the most unique.

And after a while, shaking himself mentally, a little ashamed of his temporary fall from grace, he followed the example of the more intelligent of his predecessors and settled down to itemize his assets, analyze his position and conjecture the chances of survival.

Item: He was encased in a Denby Bros. spacesuit, Mark III, open space usage, meant for no gravity use. Therefore it had no legs as such, the lower half being a rigid cylinder allowing considerable movement within and having a swivel

mounted rocket motor at its base controlled by toe pedals inside.

The upper half, semiflexible with jointed arms ending in gloves from which by contorting the shoulders the hands could be withdrawn into the sleeves when not in use.

A metal and tinted plastic helmet with earphones, mike and chin switch. An oxy air-conditioning and reprocessing unit with its spare pure oxygen tank; on this he could possibly depend for twelve hours given no undue exertion and with the most rigid economy all the time.

The power pack for suit operation and radio had a safety margin of one hour over the maximum air supply, if the radio wasn't used. At this time Johnny couldn't see much use for it.

Item: One Waste Disposal Cylinder, expendable, complete with motor and full fuel tanks, packed, according to his loading manifest with sundry supplies to avoid dead stowage space. Seldom used, since most station waste was ferried down in the otherwise empty service ships, they occasionally handled certain laboratory refuse it was considered best to destroy in space. The cylinders were decelerated and allowed to fall into atmosphere where the friction of the unchecked plunge burned up what the magnesium charge inside had not already. The rest of the shipwrecked material had by now drifted beyond easy reach and Johnny did not feel like wasting fuel rounding it up.

Position? A matter of memory and some guesswork by now. Some ten minutes out of powered flight at the time of collision, coasting up to station orbit where a quick boost from the jets would have made up his lost velocity to orbit standard. But there would be no boost now. So he'd just fall off around the other side, falling around and into Mother Earth, to skim atmosphere and climb on past and up to touch orbit altitude—and down again. A nice elliptical orbit, apogee a thousand odd miles, perigee, sixty-seventy—perhaps. How much speed had he left? How long would it be before he brushed the fringe of atmosphere once too often and too deep? Just another meteor.

And survival. A comparatively simple problem since the mechanics of it were restricted by a simple formula in which his role would seem to be a passive one. To survive he must be rescued by his own kind in twelve hours or less. To be rescued he must be seen or heard. Since his radio was a simple short-range intercom it followed that he must be seen first and heard later. Being seen meant making a sufficiently distinguishable blip on somebody's radar screen to arouse comment over a blip where, according to schedule no orbiting blip should be.

Johnny was painfully aware that the human body is very small in space. The cylinder would be a help but he doubted it would be enough. Then he thought of the material inside the cylinder. He pried back the lugs holding the cover in place with the screwdriver from his belt kit. He started pulling out packages, bags, boxes,

thrusting them behind him, above him, downwards; cereals, ready mixed pastries, bundles of disposable paper overalls—toilet paper! He worked furiously, now stuck halfway down the cylinder, kicking the bundles behind him. He emerged finally in a flurry of articles clutching a large plastic bag that had filled the entire lower end of the tank.

About him drifted a sizable cloud of station supplies, stirring sluggishly after his emergence. He pushed them a bit more, distributing them as much as possible without losing them altogether.

Johnny tore open the big bag and was instantly enveloped in clinging folds of ribbon released from the pressure of its packing. He knew what it was now, the big string of ribbon chutes for the Venus Expedition, intended for dropping a remote controlled mobile observer to the as yet unseen and unknown surface. Johnny had ferried parts of the crab-like mechanical monster on the last run, and illogically found himself worrying momentarily over the set-back to the Probe his mischance would cause.

But in the next minute he was making fast the lower end of the string to the WD cylinder, then, finding the top chute he toed his pedals and jetted himself out, trailing the string out to its full extent.

Now the period of action was over and he had done all he could, Johnny found himself dreading the time of waiting to follow. He would have time for thinking, and thinking wasn't profitable under the circumstances unless it were something definitely constructive and applicable to his present and future well-being. Waiting was always bad.

Surely they would find him soon. Surely they would press the search farther even when they found Able Jake as they couldn't fail to in time.

A tightness started in his throat. Johnny quickly drowned the thought in a flood of inconsequential nonsense, a trick he had learned as a green pilot. He might sleep though, if sleep were a possible thing in this cold emptiness. No one, to his recollection, had ever done so outside a ship or station—the space psychology types would be interested doubtless.

Johnny tied his life line to the WD cylinder and then jetted clear of his artificial cloud, positioning himself so that it formed a partial screen between himself and the sun. He turned his oxygen down to the bare minimum and the thermostat as low as he dared. He commenced a relaxation exercise and was pleased when it worked after a fashion—a mental note for Beaufort at the station. A drowsiness crept over him, dulling a little the thin edge of fear that probed his consciousness.

Face down towards the earth he hung. The slow noise of his breathing only intensified the complete silence outside. The well padded suit encompassed him so gently there was no sense of pressure on his body to make up for the weightlessness. Johnny felt as though he were bodiless, a naked brain with eyes only

hanging in nothingness.

Beneath, Earth rolled over with slow majesty, once every two hours. His altered course was evident now, passing almost directly over the geographic poles proper instead of paralleling the twilight zone where night and day met. Sometimes he caught the faint glow of a big city on the night side but the sight only stirred the worm of anxiety and he closed his eyes.

Johnny was beginning to feel very comfortable. He supposed sleepily that this was the way you were assumed to feel while freezing to death in a snowbank, or so he'd heard. Air and heat too low perhaps. He should really turn it up a notch.

On the other hand it was perhaps a solution to the problem of dying—a gentle sleep while the stomach was still full enough from the last meal to be reasonably comfortable and the throat yet unparched. Would it be the act of an unbalanced mind or one of the most supreme sanity?

He dozed and dreamed a bit in fragments and snatches but it was not a good sleep—there was no peace in it. At one time he seemed to be standing outside the old fretworked boarding house he lived in—looking in at the window of the "sitting room" where the ancient, wispy landlady sat among her antimacassared chairs and the ridiculous tiny seashell ashtrays that overflowed after two butts. He wanted desperately to get in and sprawl in the huge bat-winged chair by the fire and stroke the enormous old gray cat that would leap up and trample and paw his stomach before settling down to grumble to itself asthmatically for hours.

It was cold and dark out here and he wanted to get in to the friendliness and the warmth and the peaceful, familiar security, but he didn't dare go around to the door because he knew if he did the vision would vanish and he'd never find it again.

He scratched and beat at the window but his fingers made no sound, he tried to shout but his cries were only strangled whispers and the old lady sat and rocked and talked to the big gray cat and never turned her head.

The fire seemed to be flaring up suddenly, it was filling the whole room—a monstrous furnace; it shouldn't do that he knew, but the old lady didn't seem to mind sitting there rocking amid the flames—and it was so nice and warm. The fire kept growing and swelling though—soon it burst through the window and engulfed him. Too hot. Too hot.

Johnny swam hazily back to consciousness with an aching head and thick mouth. He saw that he had drifted clear of his protective screen somehow and the sun beat full on him. With clumsy, fumbling hands that seemed to belong to somebody else he managed the air valve; the increased oxygen reviving him enough to find the pedals and jet erratically about till he gained the shadow once more.

Now he was entering upon the worst phase of the living nightmare. Awake, the doubts and fears of his position tormented him; wearied, he feared to sleep,

yet continually he found himself nodding only to jerk awake with that suddenness that is like a physical blow. Each one of these awakenings took away a little more of his self-control till he was reduced to near hysteria, muttering abstractly, sometimes whimpering like a lost child; now seized with a feverish concern for his air supply. He would at one instant cut it down to a dangerous minimum, then, remembering the near disaster of his first attempt at economy, frantically turn it up till he was in danger of an oxygen jag. In a moment he would forget and start all over again.

In addition, he was now realizing bitterly what he had subconsciously denied to himself for so long, that they had found Able Jake and drawn the obvious conclusion. That he had been obliterated or blown out through the hull by the collision without warning or preparation. That he was undoubtedly dead if not vaporized altogether and, as they must, considering the expense of a probably fruitless search, abandon him.

There came the moment when Johnny accepted this in full. This was directly after the time when, sliding down the long hill to the perigee of his orbit, he turned on his radio and cried for help. It was a bare hundred miles or less to that wonderful world below, but there was the Heaviside layer, and the weak signals beat but feebly against it. All that seeped through by some instant's freak of transmission was a fragment of incoherent babble to reach the uncomprehending ear of an Arkansas ham and give that gentleman uneasy sleep for some time to come.

He kept calling mechanically even after perigee was long past, praying for an answer from the powerful transmitters below or from a searching ship. But when there was no slightest whisper in his phones or answering flare among the stars, Johnny came to the end of faith. Even of awareness, for his own ears did not register the transition of his calls to an insane howling of intermixed pleas, threats, condemnation—a sewer flood of foul vilification against those who had betrayed him.

Bright and beautiful, Earth rolled blandly beneath him, the sun was a remote impersonal thing and the stars mocked silently. After a while the radio carried only the agonized sounds of a man who had forgotten how to cry and must learn again. There were times after this when he observed incuriously a parade of mind pictures, part memory, part pure hallucination and containing nothing of reason; other times when he thought not at all. The sun appeared to dwindle, retreating and fading far away into a remote place where there were no stars at all. It became a feeble candle, guttered unsteadily a moment and suddenly winked out. Abruptly Johnny was asleep.

He opened his eyes and surveyed the scene with an oddly calm and dispassionate curiosity, not that he expected to find his status changed in any way but because he had awakened with a queer sense of unreality about the whole busi-

ness. He knew vaguely that he'd had a bad time in the last few hours but could remember little of the details save that it was like one of those fragmentary nightmares in the instant between sleeping and waking when it is difficult to divide the fact from the dream. Now he must reassure himself that this facet of it was real and when he had done so, realized with a faint shock that he was no longer afraid.

Fear, it seemed, had by its incessant pressure dulled its own edge. The acceptance of inevitable death was still there, but now it seemed to have little more significance than the closing of a book at the last page.

It is possible that Johnny was not wholly sane at this point, but there is no one to witness this and Johnny, not given to introspection at any time, felt no spur to self-analysis, beyond a brief mental registration of the fact.

So he made his visual survey, saw that it was real, nothing had changed; noted with mild surprise that he'd somehow remained in the shadow of his screen this time. He had lost track of time entirely but the suit's air supply telltale was in the yellow indicating about two hours more or less to go on breathing. In quick succession he reviewed the events, accepted the probability of the abandoned search without a qualm and made his decision. There was no need to wait about any longer.

A quick flip of the helmet lock, a moment's unpleasantness perhaps, and out. As for the rest—a spaceman needs no sanctified ground, the incorruptible vault of space is as good a place as any and perhaps the more fitting for one of the first to travel its ways.

Well then—quickly. Johnny raised his hands.

But still—

Man has his pride and his vanity. Johnny, though not necessarily prone to inflated valuation of himself still has just enough vanity left to resent the thought of this anonymous snuffing out in the dark. There should be, he thought, at least some outward evidence of his passing, something like—a flare of light perhaps, that would in effect say, if only to one solitary star gazer: "Here at this position, at this instant, Johnny Melland, Spaceman, had his time."

The whimsy persisted. Johnny, casting about mentally for some means to the end recalled the thermite bomb for the WD cylinder and was hauling himself in to it when he remembered the charges for this lot had gone up with Sally Uncle One two days before. But now he'd actually touched the metal cylinder and, as though the brief contact had completed some obscure mental circuit, the mad idea was conceived, flared up into an irrepressible brilliance and exploded in a harsh bark of laughter.

One last push to his luck then, hardly worse than a gambler's last chip except that the consequences of failure were somewhat more certain. Either way he'd have what he wanted—survival or, in the brief incandescence of friction's

heat, a declaration of his passing.

A waste disposal cylinder will carry the equivalent of about three tons of refuse. Its motor is designed to decelerate that mass by 1,075 mph in order to allow it to assume a descending orbit.

Less the greater part of the customary mass, it should be considerably more effective, and since he was already in what constituted a descent path, but for a few miles and a little extra velocity, there would not be the long fall afterwards to pick up what he'd lost.

From there on his plan entered the realm of pure hypothesis; except for the broad detail the rest depended on luck and whatever freakish conditions might arise in his favor during the operation. These, too, would be beyond his control and any move to take advantage of them would have to be instinctive, providing he was in any shape to do so.

The tendency to gnaw worriedly at a thousand disturbing possibilities drowned quickly in a rapidly rising sense of reckless abandon that possessed him. The prospect of positive action of any sort served to release any tension left in him and almost gayly he moved to set his plan in action.

He jimmied the timer on the rocket motor so it would fire to the last drop. The string of ribbon chutes he reeled in hand over hand stuffing it into the cylinder, discovering in the process why the chute Section hands at Base wore that harried look. The mass of slithering, incompressible white-and-yellow ribbon and its shrouds resisted him like a live thing; in the end Johnny managed to bat and maul the obstreperous stuff down the length of the tank. Even so, it filled it to within a couple of inches of the opening.

Now he cut off a length of his life line and attached one end to the spring-loaded trigger release on the motor control, leaving enough to trail the length of the cylinder and double back inside when he wanted it. He blessed the economically minded powers that insisted on manual firing control on these one-shot units instead of the complex radio triggers beloved of the technical brains.

Making fast to the chutes was a major problem but eventually he managed a makeshift harness of the remainder of the safety line. He wound it awkwardly around himself with as many turns as possible, each returned again and again through, the ring at the end of the master shroud.

By now he was casting anxious glances at the Earth below, aware that he must have passed apogee several minutes before and that not more than some twenty minutes were left before the low point of this swing would be near. He was grimly aware also that it must be this time or not at all. The air telltale was well through the yellow band and the next possible chance after this one was an hour's time away, when conditions inside the suit would be getting pretty sticky.

Jockeying the unwieldy cylinder into line of flight and making it stay there

took a lot longer than Johnny counted on. With no other manual purchase than that afforded by his own lesser mass, the job proved almost impossible and he had to use his suit motor. This caused some concern over his meager fuel supply since his plan called for some flat-out jetting later on. In the frantic flurry of bending, twisting, over and under—controlling, the veneer of aplomb began to wear. Johnny was sweating freely by the time he had the cylinder stabilized as best he could judge and had gingerly worked himself into the open end as far as he could against the cushioning mass of ribbon chute. He took the trigger lanyard loosely in hand and craning his neck to see past the bulk of the cylinder he watched and waited.

To the experienced lift pilot there are certain subtle changes in color values over the Earth's surface as one approaches more closely the outer fringe of atmosphere. While braking approaches are auto-controlled, the pilot taking over only after his ship is in atmosphere, the conscientious man makes himself familiar with the "feel" of a visually timed approach—just in case—and Johnny was a good pilot.

Watching Equatorial Africa sliding obliquely towards him Johnny suddenly gave thought to a possible landing spot for the first time. Not that he had any choice but a picture of a cold, wet immersion in any of several possible bodies of water was not encouraging. The suit would probably float but which end first was a matter for conjecture and out of it he would be as badly off for Johnny could not swim a stroke.

Nor had he any clear idea how long it would take to slow down to a vertical drop. Able Jake made a full half swing of the globe to brake down but Able Jake was an ultra-streamlined object with many times the mass and weight of Johnny and his rig; furthermore the ships were controllable to a certain degree while Johnny was not. Beyond the certain knowledge that the effect of the chutes would be quite violent and probably short-lived, the rest was unpredictable.

He tried to shake off gloomy speculation, uneasily aware that much of the carefree confidence of the last hour had deserted him. In a more normal state of mind again he became prey to tension once more, a pounding heart and dry mouth recalling mercilessly the essential frailties of his kind. So, with aching neck and burning eyes he strained for a clear view past the length of the cylinder and—

There! The preliminary to the visual changes, a sudden sweep of distortion over the landscape as his angle of sight through the refracting particles became more shallow. Now was the time he had judged the throat vane gyros should begin their run-up.

He worked the lanyard back carefully, fearful an awkward movement might upset the cylinder's line-up, pulling the trigger lever over to half-cock where the micro switch should complete circuit with the dry power pack. There should be approximately one minute before the major color changes began, which was also

the minimum time for gyro run up. Johnny resumed the watching and the waiting.

How long is a minute?

Is it the time it takes the fear-frozen trainee, staring glass-eyed at the fumbled grenade to realize that this one at his feet is a dud?

Or is it the time before the rock-climber, clinging nail and toe to the rock face with the rope snapped suddenly taut, feels it at last slacken and sees the hands gripping safely come into sight?

Perhaps the greenhorn, rifle a-waver, watching the glimpse of tawny color in the veldt-grass and waiting the thunder and the charge, could say.

They'd all be wrong. It's much longer.

Long enough for Johnny to think of a dozen precautions he could have taken, a dozen better ways to rig this or that. Long enough to worry about whether the gyros were really running up as they should. A thousand queries and doubts piled mountainously upward to an almost unbearable peak of tension till suddenly the browns and greens below flashed a shade lighter and it was time, and the savage snap on the lanyard a blessed relief and total committal.

In the few seconds after the firing of the prime and before the busy little timer snapped the valves wide open Johnny managed to slip his toes under the jet pedals to avoid accidental firing. At the same time he braced himself as rigidly as possible with aching arms against the walls of the cylinder.

He saw briefly the flare of the jet reflected off the remnants of his cloud of station stores before deceleration with all its unpleasantness began.

The lip of the cylinder's mouth swept up past his helmet as he was rammed deep into the absorbent mass of ribbon chute. This wasn't a padded contour chair under a mild 3G lift. The chutes took the first shock, but Johnny took the rest the hard way, standing bolt upright.

He found with some surprise his head was right down through the neck ring and inside the suit proper, his arms half withdrawn from the sleeves, knees buckled to an almost unbelievable angle considering the dimensions of the lower case.

He had time to hope fervently the cheap expendable motor wouldn't burn out its throat and send him cart-wheeling through space, or blow the surrounding tanks before the blackout came down.

He came out of it sluggishly, to find the relief from the dreadful pressure almost as stupefying as the deceleration itself. While his conscious mind screamed the urgency of immediate action, his bruised and twisted body answered but feebly. The condition of complete weightlessness and the springy reaction of the ribbon mass was all that allowed him finally to claw himself out of the cylinder to where he could use the suit jet without fear of burning the precious chutes.

He was so tired. His muscles of their own accord seemed to relax intermit-

tently, interfering with the control of his movements. Only the sudden sight of the Earth, transformed by a weird illusion of position from a bright goal to an enormous, distorted thing, looming, apparently, over him with glowing menace, spurred his flagging resolution to frantic activity.

He jetted straight back trailing his string of chutes behind him, then, before the last was free of the cylinder, kicked himself around to assume the original course once more.

At this stage it was no longer possible, even granted the time, to judge visually how near he was to the atmosphere. The uneasy feeling that he must already be brushing the Troposphere jarred his nerve so that he merely gave himself a short flat-out boost in the right direction before spinning bodily one hundred eighty degrees so that he was traveling feet first.

Reflected in the curved helmet face, the string of chutes obediently followed-my-leader around a ragged U-shape, the last—the small pilot-chute trailed limply around as he watched.

There could surely be but a few seconds left before the grand finale. Johnny found he was unconsciously holding his breath, and, as he deliberately inhaled long slow draughts of his already staling air, realized abstractly that he seemed to be attempting to meet his possible end with some degree of dignity if not with resignation, and wondered if he were the exception or the rule.

Possibly, he thought sardonically, because there is so little room for dignity in our living years, and was mildly surprised at an uncharacteristic excursion into the realm of philosophy.

There was a faintly perceptible tug on the harness. It was sustained and now there came a definite strain. Reflected for a moment in the helmet face was a glimpse of the lead chute slowly opening out like a gigantic flower.

Then swiftly, in half a breath the harness coils were tightening about him like steel fingers, the heavy ring at the end of the master shroud clashed against the back of his helmet and began a sickening, thrumming vibration there.

The harness encompassed his torso like a vise but his legs were unsupported and weighed what seemed a thousand tons. He could feel them stretching. Somewhere a coil slipped a fraction. His arms were jerked suddenly upwards and Johnny knew a sensation he'd never believed possible. At the same time his leaden feet crashed down on the jet pedals. For a few, brief, blessed moments the intolerable extension eased a fraction with the firing of the suit jets.

He cringed mentally from the thought of what was to come and thought hazily: "This is what the rack was like. This is going to be bad, bad, bad!"

It was impossible and Johnny went out with the last drop of fuel.

Somewhere there was a queer coughing sound like wind through a crevice. He strained to identify it but an awful agony swamped him and he fled before

it back into the darkness.

And later still a thumping and a rushing, gurgling sound.

Dim, grotesque figures moved about him or swooped and hovered over him. He felt an unreasoning fear of them and tried to shut them out. They were holding him down, hurting him. One was pulling and twisting at his arm. He shouted and swore at it telling it to leave him alone, but it ignored him or didn't seem to hear. There was a sudden dull snapping sound and a little of the pain abated.

The figures flowed together and swirled around like some great oily vortex but never quite left him.

Then there was a time when they separated jerkily and became the hazy but definable figures of men in rough seaman's clothes. Johnny had never heard Breton French before; in his dazed condition the apparently insane gabble might well have been the tongue of another world and gave him little assurance. He hurt so badly and so generally that he could not have determined that he was lying down save for a view of white clouds scudding overhead.

Some of the men were holding up what looked like a crumpled parody of a man. He recognized it without surprise as the soaking remains of his spacesuit, battered and with tattered shreds of outer cover and insulation hanging in festoons.

A sharp, bearded face shot into focus abruptly, waving a hypodermic needle. It spoke English and observed passionately either to Johnny or itself that: "Name of a Spanish cow! What is it in men that they must abuse themselves so? Now here is one who was both squeezed and stretched alternately as well as hammered, dehydrated and almost asphyxiated, is it not? This will bear watching. It is alive but there will have to be X-rays in profusion."

It danced long sensitive fingers over the welts and bruises and commented bluntly that it was well the fishermen had returned his arms and legs into their sockets before he fully regained consciousness. It muttered and clucked to itself as it used the hypo which Johnny could not feel. "Formidable!"

The pleasant drowsiness came down just as he was identifying the queer smell as ozone, brine and good fresh air.

After a while they moved him to a small hospital in an upcoast town, where he slept much, suffered not a little and, even waking, viewed the world incuriously through drug-laden eyes. Finally they allowed him to waken fully and the sharp-faced doctor, together with half a dozen others from various parts of the world decided that, after all, he seemed to be surviving.

Johnny lay and itched intolerably in the cast that covered him from nape to thigh and listened to the bustling of the elderly nursing sister who, good soul, having never been more than ten miles from her town in her life, reminded him that it wanted but two days to Christmas and opined that: "Such a tragedy for

M'sieu. To be so far from home!''

Johnny smiled at the ceiling, not daring to laugh yet, and sniffed at the salt sea air with its undertone of rank seaweed and gloried in it; even a chance whiff of that particular cigarette tobacco that only a Frenchman can appreciate. He thought that here, as across the water, night and day followed each other in their proper order and the ground was a solid thing beneath the feet.

Why—he could never be closer.

FELINE RED

A shouting wave of men rioted through the engine room.

From the bridge above the hulking atomics, Chief Engineer Durval vollied orders in a thunderous voice. "You men—you!" he raged. "Use your heads, not your feet. Drive them toward the door."

A scattering of Them—compact darting beasts the color of a poppy—scuttled into the shadow of an engine. Heavy Davison wrenches clubbed futilely behind them.

As Durval flew into new bursts of shouting, Scott Jerill, First Mate of the freighter *Bertha*, grimly shook his head. His lean face was not smiling now. "Call your men back," he commanded crisply. "We don't have time to drive those cats out like this."

Durval turned on him with a snarl. "Take over then. Think of a better way. If you hadn't hauled that load of space cats aboard in the first place...."

"Look out," Scott snapped.

With a crisp smack, a red creature the size of a man's hand struck the rail before them. It was all improbable angles, with no special shape, no front or back. It teetered crazily over the ten foot drop to the floor below. Then it settled, sputtering. It sounded curiously like an angry cat.

"There's one," roared Durval. His wrench slashed down, crashed shrilly on the rail as the cat skimmed effortlessly away. The wrench shot off toward the floor.

Durval shook his hand and roared. The cat, some twenty feet down the rail, cackled insanely. As Scott stepped slowly toward it, the cat hissed, bounded off the rail, and down the steps to the engine room floor.

Scott shook his head. "You're not going to catch them by hand. Better let them settle down, Durval."

"Settle down." The Chief brought the palm of his hand down on the rail. The rail trembled. "They've already settled down. On every generator in the place. One of them crawled under the main relay switch and shorted out half the board.

Didn't hurt him a bit."

Scott interrupted gruffly. "We've got to get them out of here fast. Captain Elderburg wants to blast off here day after tomorrow, and we don't have half the ore cargo purified yet."

"And you won't have," Durval snapped. "If we blast off, we'll do it with an empty hold. I can't purify uranium with fifty cats running loose, getting caught in the machinery. It can't be done. Get these cats out and I'll give you a hold full of the best grade uranium Earth ever bought. But not till you get those cats out."

Scowling, Scott bit his knuckles. "We've got to get moving. The skipper thinks IP Metals is going to jump our claim," he said urgently.

"If you ask me, only a doddering fool would bring these things into a space ship." He glanced sharply at Scott. "What's this about IPM?"

Scott shook his head slowly. "Nothing. Forget I said anything. But get these cats out. And fast. Have you tried ultra-sonics on them?"

Durval's face slipped into new lines. "Maybe," he muttered. Leaning over the railing, he thundered, "Masters. Forget those cats a minute. Yes, forget them. Hook up an ultra-sonics sender and—"

The ship intercom over Durval's head clicked mechanically, hummed into life. "Mr. Jerill. Report to Central Control. Mr. Jerill. Report—"

Scott jabbed the Acknowledgement button. As he swung around Durval he glanced down into the engine room. Sweating men beat after the scuttling red beasts.

"Report to me about the sonics," he told Durval. "If that doesn't work, we'll scoop up those red kitties with our bare hands. But we got to get started on that uranium ore purification. Faster than ten minutes ago."

He slammed the engine room door, cutting off Durval's angry roar. Striding rapidly through the bluish light of the corridor, an anger bitter as Durval's throbbed in him. But he took pains to hold it down.

"Confound those cats," he thought. "The *Kastil* on top of us, and we have to stop work to chase space fauna. And we have three days left. Three days."

So engrossed was he in anger that he almost blundered head-on into the grinning red-head who lounged up the corridor toward him.

"Hey, Scott." Second Mate Max Vaugn raised a lazy eyebrow. "Slow down. Think of all your ulcers."

Scott spun impatiently on his heel. "Can't stop, Max. Got to see the Captain."

"And you don't even stop to say hello to an old friend back from the mines of a nameless asteroid." He grinned, slapped Scott's shoulder lightly with an open palm. "What's all this scandal I hear about your space cats?"

Scott grimaced. "I caught a few while we were scooping up ore over at my pit. Thought the Extra-Terrestrial Life Division back on Earth might be interested in them. They don't eat. They don't breathe.... Only their cage got smashed open, and they got into the engine room. Nobody knows how."

"The good news has got around," Max said grinning. "You don't know it, but there's twenty more sitting outside the main cargo hatch right now. What gets rid of them?"

"If you think of anything," Scott said as he turned away, "tell me. Got to go. Elderburg's waiting."

"Have you tried hitting them with strong light?" Max shouted after him.

"No," Scott shouted back. He was very late, and the Old Man wanted you fast when he wanted you. "Try light if you get a chance."

He broke into an effortless trot, his boots padding lightly on the shining gray floor. "Three days," he thought. He forgot Max. He forgot Durval and the cats. He thought, "Three days," and a fine film of perspiration spread cold across his back.

"We have three days," Captain Elderburg said. He was a small neat man with a prim voice. His bland eyes peered forward into some middle distance, ignoring Scott.

And Scott, sitting tautly in his chair, felt glad those eyes were not on him.

"In three days," the Captain said, "or probably before, the *Kastil* should find us. The *Kastil*—the best ship Inner-Planet Metals ever commissioned."

Scott nodded. In the savage, free-for-all world of the space-miner, the *Kastil* was known as the big ship, the new ship. The ship that could load its cargo hatches in a day, stuffing 100,000 tons of ore down in its belly for the hungering plants of Earth.

"I've fought IP Metals for fifteen years," Elderburg said slowly. His eyes were very far away. "For fifteen years they've grown bigger and bigger, and the bigger they've got, the rougher they've played. You know their record, Scott. Murder, claim-jumping. What they can't steal with a blaster, they take by law."

Glancing through the open port behind the Captain's head, out into the star-dappled dark of space, Scott asked: "Is there any way we can set up a permanent claim here on this asteroid without going back to Earth?"

"You know better than that." Elderburg's eyes turned full on Scott. "Unless we bring a full cargo of reasonably purified ore to Earth, we can't lay claim to these mines, or to any other mineral rights here."

His hands closed neatly, one inside the other. "And we've got to get a cargo back. This is our last chance. A strike as rich as this one will keep us going for a long time. But if we lose this claim to IPM, the days of the independent miner are

over. Done with. We might as well sell the *Bertha* and get out."

"We'll be out of here in two days," Scott said eagerly. "If we...."

"If," said Elderburg very plainly. His eyes turned away from Scott and his hands went all loose at once and spread out flat on the table.

"If we cannot load in two days, Mister Jerill. If your cats that you so foolishly brought on board the *Bertha* delay us so much that the *Kastil* locates us. And beats us home with a load of ore. If that happens, Mister Jerill, I will see that you are black-listed from the rolls of every space flight unit now operating. You will be completely responsible for the failure of this cruise."

Slumping back in his seat, he grinned maliciously at Scott. "I realize that our company was offering you a captain's position at the end of the expedition...."

Scott stood up. Anger hammered powerfully at his temples. "All right. I admit I made a mistake. And I take full responsibility for my actions."

"You must admit, Mister Jerill, that only a fool would bring an unknown space beast into a ship."

"Only a fool would deny that the cats are as valuable as uranium in their own way."

"Now, Mister Jerill. Be very careful." There was no mistaking the venom in Elderburg's speech. In his passionless black eyes, viciousness lay coiled. "Your cats have stopped purification of the crude ore for two days. Two days, Mister Scott. We might have been Earth-bound by this time."

Scott leaned over the desk. In a voice quivering with anger, he said: "Listen to me. If you...."

There was a shocking blast of light. Stunning volumes of white light poured from the port behind the Captain's head. It blazed too brilliantly for the naked eye.

With a strangled exclamation, Scott stumbled for the port, clutching his eyes. His fingers clawed nervelessly for the light control.

There was a sharp snap as the port closed. They felt, rather than saw, the light flick abruptly out. Elderburg tore at the door.

They lurched into the corridor. Green-yellow lights flashed before their dazzled eyes. Scott located the wall and began to run, using his finger tips as guides.

"A magnesium flare!" The Captain's words drove at Scott, hard as fragments of metal. "What fool set off a magnesium flare with the *Kastil* on top of us?"

They stumbled through the cool corridor to the second level air lock. As they approached, the lock clanged open. A space-suited figure waddled into the corridor. The helmet opened back, revealing the vivid red hair of Second Mate Vaugn.

"Light don't bother those cats a bit," he announced. Then his grin faded. "What's the matter?"

The Captain croaked, "You set off a flare—when—when the *Kastil* has been hunting our claim for weeks. When they're right on top of us!"

Max's face blanched. "The *Kastil*! Scott, you never told me...." Sudden cunning swept his face. "Why didn't you tell me the *Kastil* was so close, Scott? Why did you tell me to try light on the cats when you knew—"

"Scott told you!" Elderburg snarled. But at that moment Scott cried out sharply, pointing out through the port by the air lock.

Two miles beyond the *Bertha*, settled a black cigar. Blue-white fire flared from its base. "The *Kastil*!" Scott gasped. Useless rage flooded his chest. "The *Kastil*—and she's found us!"

Under the hurtling jet, the surface of the asteroid was a jagged tangle of stone. Scott, staring tensely from the observation port, felt a swift moment of wonder. Two hours since the IPM ship had landed. And he was in trouble with a vengeance.

As he had left the ship with a party of picked men, he had felt Elderburg's cold eyes on him. Eyes that thought—and threatened.

It was easy enough to read the Old Man's mind. An officer might make one vital mistake. But not two—not introducing the cats into the ship; not permitting a flare to be set off. Unless....

Unless he wanted the *Bertha* to lose time. Unless he wanted the *Kastil* to find the precious claim.

Cold raced through Scott's veins. His hands locked white about the space helmet he was about to don. He had to prove his loyalty. Had to prove that the accidents were accidents. And little time was left, as the *Kastil* could load completely in two days.

"There's the pit, Mister Jerill." The navigator's voice was strained. "See anybody?"

"Not yet. Set her down."

The cargo jet dipped. The vast peaks of shattered stone sped up at them with terrifying speed. Scott refrained from closing his eyes, saw the razor-toothed surface of this shattered world streak toward him. Ahead, the bulk of the *Kastil* loomed. They must have used the ore pits as a landing marker, he thought. And—what was that?

Motion at the lip of the ore pit.

The jet grounded hissing on the burnt landing strip. "Watch it," Scott warned. "We got visitors out there."

There was an ugly muttering among the men. As Scott threw open the cargo

doors and dropped to the rocky ground, he saw the crewmen checking blasters and the slender polonium tubes that could permanently blind a man.

He stepped away from the jet. And as he did so, seven men detached themselves from the shadows about the mine's edge, and strolled toward him. Seven men—two more than were with Scott. The odds might be worse, he thought with a sense of relief.

Cautiously, he loosened the blaster in his belt. They were tricky weapons to handle in space gloves, but he'd better be ready to use it fast.

"Party from the *Bertha*?" The words came thin and metallic into Scott's helmet.

"Right," he grunted. "You?"

"From the *Kastil*. Who gave you a clearance to land on our claim?"

"We have a prior claim on this pit," Scott flared. "We have it posted and registered. If you're going to mine, find someplace else."

A giant figure, grimly grotesque in a cumbersome vacuum suit, swaggered forward. "I don't see any of your claim posts."

Scott indicated a tall metal stake glittering somberly in the glare of the jet's loading lights.

The tall man laughed easily, his voice thin and far away in Scott's helmet. "Think of a better story. We just dug that claimer in ourselves. Now suppose you people jet out of here. Ought to be plenty of good claims someplace else."

Scott scarcely heard the sudden bitter burst of protest from his men. His body felt light and cool. The blaster pressed hard against his side. "There are plenty of good claims," he said. "You better go find them."

He swung the blaster up in a single smooth motion.

The tall man stood very still. They were not close enough to see each other's faces.

Then, high on a plateau of stone above the tall man's head, Scott saw the stars blot out.

"Scatter!" As he shouted, he took a giant leap to the right.

A blast of energy seared from the darkness, gouging a vast hole where Scott had stood.

From behind a boulder he could see the fire of the blaster sweep across the upper edges of the rocks, just at the level where the stars were cut off.

For a moment, the cold green line of his fire flicked harmlessly over naked stone. Then a thick squirt of fire flared quickly. A still-born scream died in his earphones.

The men of the *Kastil* had dodged away into the darkness.

Scott's voice rang out harshly. "I'll give you men two minutes to organize and get out of here. If you're not out by that time, we'll spin our jet around and burn you out."

There was a brief stir off in the shadows.

"You're in a blind alley there," Scott continued. "There's no way out. And we'll blast any man who tries to climb out over the rocks. Is that clear?"

A glowing flash of energy exploded against the rock protecting him. There was no sound, but bits of stone lightly flecked his suit. Scott braced himself on the rough face of the boulder and worked the blaster around for an open shot.

"No more shooting," the heavy voice of the tall man growled. "You *Bertha* people. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Scott said coldly. His eyes probed the shadows for motion.

"We're willing to be peaceful about this. I'm Captain Randell of the *Kastil*. There's no need for killing when there's plenty of ore for all of us."

"Not in this pit," Scott answered. "You have one minute."

"All right." Randell's voice, distorted as it was by the tiny radio, carried a sardonic edge. "We'll go—from here."

He sauntered out of the shadows, hands upraised. From the tangle of stone, his men crept out to join him. Without haste, insolent in their retreat, they crossed over the pit.

At the far side they paused. "This is the extent of your so-called claim." Randell's voice purred in their ears. "Our claim extends from this line. And if a man from the *Bertha* wants a quick blasting, he can cross this line." His radio snapped off with crisp finality.

Scott stepped from his shelter.

"All right," he ordered. "You men know the story. The *Kastil's* down here ready for work. And it's going to mean work if we're going to beat her back to Earth. Now, let's go. But watch your step."

They worked. Eighteen hours a day they worked. From the steel-like ground they scooped a dozen tons of the dirty black uranium ore and sent it hurtling back to the *Bertha*.

But in spite of all their efforts, the more modern equipment of the *Kastil* overtook them in a day. The blackness on their left was riddled with the flare of digging torches and the slender fire-trails of the jets soaring between the pit and the *Kastil*.

And now and again, Randell's drawling voice broke into Scott's ears. "You're slowing up, *Bertha*. Seventy tons for us today. Are you poor little men getting tired?" He clucked sympathetically, then burst into a yell of laughter. "We'll have the ore cleaned off this rock before you get half loaded."

But Scott and the men of the *Bertha* worked silently, with savage haste, forgetting sleep and food to keep the tonnage flowing to their ship. They had almost forgotten the cats....

But not for long.

Staggering with fatigue, Scott swayed into Central Control, and sagged into a seat. He had been too long in a space suit. A dull pounding beat behind his eyes. "I came as soon as you called the pit, Captain Elderburg. You sounded pretty urgent."

"It's urgent," Elderburg said. "We're beaten."

Scott stiffened. Fatigue fell from him as he gazed closely at the Captain, saw for the first time the bitter dullness of Elderburg's eyes.

"You better come with me," the Old Man said heavily. He rose stiffly, led the way from the room.

In silence they shuffled down the corridor toward the engine room. A tic worked at the corner of the Captain's mouth, but he did not seem to notice it. "Durval held the cats off with ultra-sonics. He purified about ten tons of the stuff and stored it."

They threaded their way along a chill black catwalk to the center of the ship. In the engine room, men slumped sullenly among the big atomics. As Scott and Elderburg passed a group of the black gang, mutely dangling wrenches, there was a sudden stir.

"That's him!" One of the men had leaped up. The wrench whipped back over his shoulder. He leaped raging toward Scott. "There's the rotten...."

"Easy, Billy." He was dragged back, disarmed.

"How'd the *Kastil* know...."

The Captain tugged Scott's arm. "Don't bother with them. Come on."

Scott nodded numbly, followed, his head aching and a nameless wave of apprehension sliding through him. "Where are the cats?" he asked once.

Elderburg ignored him. "Put on a radiation suit."

They had stopped before a side door of the main hold. As Scott struggled into the suit his mind swirled in a chaos of thoughts. When the suit was adjusted he dropped the helmet shut and stepped forward. Through the lighter gravity of the air lock they lumbered. Then Elderburg spun the controls that opened the door.

"There you are," he said to Scott. He sounded completely deflated. No sting remained in his voice.

Scott stepped forward into the hold, then froze. His body went cold.

The hold was a writhing mass of cats.

Their queer angled bodies darted in a great pile beyond the door. Their red bodies glowed and twisted strangely. They flew about a huge stack of lead

containers—uranium cells secured for the long trip home.

And Scott went sick with understanding. Through rigid lips, he forced the words: "Energy-eaters!"

The Captain laughed oddly. "And you wondered how they lived on this naked rock. They ate the raw ore, of course. No wonder they hung around Durval's machines sucking up what free energy they could. They broke through the air feeder system here. No wonder. With cells of 80% pure uranium waiting for them." His voice broke.

"So we're finished," he continued. "The *Kastil* will be loaded before we can even clean the cats out. We're done."

He swayed back against the bulkhead. Scott took his arm.

"Get away from me." Elderburg wrenched away, his loathing clear even behind the bulky suit. "If what the men say is true. If you sold us out—" His voice trailed off. "Call your men out of the pits, Jerill. We're blasting off tonight."

"No." Scott leaned forward, his eyes mere slits behind the lense of his helmet. "Is there any uranium left?"

"We saved two cells."

"It's enough," Scott snapped. His lean jaw lifted proudly. "It's a little late, Captain. But I can promise to get rid of the cats in two hours. With the ore deposits Vaugn and I have collected, we can still load a good cargo and beat the *Kastil* out by at least a day."

Elderburg eyed him sharply. "How can you handle the cats?"

"Get me a lead-lined box about eight feet by...."

Static blasted shrilly in their ears. The voice of the ship's lookout, strained with excitement, shouted. "Captain Elderburg. This is Main Control. Get here fast. An explosion at Lieutenant Jerill's mine."

As Elderburg leaped for the door with a muffled roar, the lookout's voice tautened. "No. No. Not an explosion. It's the *Kastil*. They're attacking the mine. They're attacking the mine."

They crammed into the observation blister on the *Bertha's* nose. Scanners swept smoothly over the wilderness of stone jutting up between the ship and the mine.

"There's a fire fight going out there." Elderburg's square face knotted with anger. "Scott, take a party. Blow that livid scum crew off this rock."

"Right, sir!" Scott bolted from the observation port. The emergency alarm howled through the ship. He buckled on a pair of blasters with unsteady hands, a black fury sweeping him. He stabbed one long finger down on the intercom.

"Masters," he yelled. "Get the cargo jet ready. With full battle equipment."

"Right, lieutenant. What's up?"

"Piracy." He spun toward the door. Then jolted to a halt, hands balling at his sides.

A picture was forming on the Master Communication Screen.

Elderburg pounded to his side. "Who is it?"

The picture on the screen was very definite now—a swarthy giant of a man, cynically grinning down at them. "Gentlemen," the figure on the screen said, and Scott needed no further introduction.

It was Randell, master of the ship *Kastil*.

"We've had a very entertaining two days," Randell said. His thick hands rubbed easily together. "It's been a real pleasure watching you work. But I'm afraid the pleasure is over. We're leaving you now. Oh, that disturbance at your mine pit?" He laughed, but only with his mouth; the close-set eyes remained unchanging, watchful. "It seemed so unnecessary to bother mining ore when so much of it was stacked near our pit."

"You bloody murdering bandit," Elderburg thundered. "We'll blast you...."

"You'll blast nobody. Any party approaching the *Kastil* will get blasted. Any party near the claim—our claim—will get burned down. By the way, I'm afraid your men at the mine contracted space-sickness, or something. They seem to be dead. You needn't bother coming after them."

He began to chuckle. "I think the ore my men are bringing in now will just complete our cargo. See you back on Earth."

The screen went gray. The sound shut off with a loud click.

Elderburg swung on Scott. "Take your men. Clean out that nest of thieves before they remove any more ore. Order out full battle gear. We'll blast the *Kastil* apart if it takes every man on board this ship."

"No!" Scott caught Elderburg's shoulder, gripped him. "There isn't time for an armed attack. I have a better idea."

"Scott, I order you to...."

"Get me a box," Scott cried desperately. "Made of lead and six feet deep."

Elderburg jerked his shoulder free. His face contorted. "Get to your cabin, Jerill. You're under arrest."

"Captain Elderburg, listen to me. We can...."

"That's a direct order. Go to your cabin." He whirled away from Scott, slammed down the intercom lever. "Attention all hands. Prepare full battle equipment...."

Scott slashed his blaster hard across the back of the Captain's head. Elderburg staggered, clutched the back of the seat. Scott hit him again. Elderburg's legs went loose. He toppled face forward, struck the intercom and sagged to the floor.

Scott stepped to the intercom. "Attention. All men, prepare full battle equipment and stand by. Stand by. Durval, get the largest lead-lined box you have and set it outside the entrance of the main cargo hatch. Shake it up. We have half an hour till the *Kastil* jets off."

He cut off the intercom, lugged Elderburg to the chart room and locked him inside.

The hold was beastly hot. Standing inside the hatchway, holding suspended over his head a three-foot long cell of uranium ore, Scott felt a moment of shuddering panic. Over the storage cells along the wall, over the tumbling bodies of the cats, an eerie glow quivered—the menacing flare of radio-activity.

Scott glanced nervously at the forward screen. Chief Durval waved toward him. "Your men ready, Durval?"

The Chief nodded. "Don't go getting yourself hurt now, Scott."

Scott grinned although he did not feel much like grinning.

He shuffled forward under the light gravity of the hold. The uranium cell balanced easily in his hands. Too easily. He could scarcely feel it press against his gloves. The heat control in his suit was jammed again. His hands streamed sweat.

He inched past the cats. A quick cold thrill passed through his stomach. With the energy of the ore almost gone, the scarlet beasts were growing increasingly uneasy. They were casting about for a new supply. It would be easy enough for a foot to slip, he thought. To spill the ore across the floor. New food for the cats—and the loss of the *Bertha's* last chance as strange space beasts sucked away the last purified ore.

He slipped cautiously past the last row of cells. A quick dash now for the open hatchway beyond....

Half a dozen of the bounding red beasts surged about his feet. Their weight drove his right leg forward. He staggered, caught at his balance. The lead cell above his head began to slip.

"Watch it, Scott!" Durval's voice cracked in his ears.

Straining every muscle against the queer weightlessness of no gravity, Scott struggled to regain his balance. He expected another blow at his legs as the cats leaped for the ore. It was hard to breathe the over-heated air of his suit.

But the cats had spun away. As he caught his balance, he stared after them, uncomprehending for an instant. The cats ran twisting in a somehow sinister dance. The bodies were queerly bloated. Down the upper portion of their bodies ran a heavy indentation. As they leaped and twisted, the indentation became a fissure, a crevice.

Then two of the beasts leaped, slammed together in mid-air. But more than two cats fell to the floor.

Their sharply angled bodies whisking back toward the depleted uranium cells, four cats appeared with shocking suddenness.

Reproduction. Elemental fission.

Scott had to clean them out, and fast. Soon the ship would be overrun with the energy-hungry felines.

He dashed toward the open hatch. Outside the opening, a great lead box, eight feet by eight feet, gaped upward. Beyond, four men tensely supported a vast lead cover.

"Is the uranium poured into the box?" he barked sharply.

"Yes, sir. All ready, Mister Jerill."

"Good." Turning from the hatch, he inverted his cell, poured out the uranium ore in a thick stream from the open hatch back across the hold toward the scrambling mass of cats upon the now empty rows of cells.

But he never reached the beasts.

A brawling torrent of animals leaped toward him. Hurling the container into their mass, he leaped to one side. They lunged into the trail of ore. Rolled, leaped, darted along the line. At the hatch edge, a pyramiding mass of cats paused a moment. Then plummeted over. Scott fell back against the bulkhead, his eyes fixed on the cats still scavenging among the empty cells.

Then these too were darting for the trail of ore. The uranium was scattered now. Cats plunged toward the new radiation in the box beyond the hold entrance.

The inarticulate cheers of Durval and his men rang in Scott's helmet. But his mind was already working at the next step of the problem.

"Durval," he ordered. "Get a decontamination unit in here. Clean this place out." Cats poured in a frenzied stream from the ship. "Call Mister Vaugn. Start purification of his ore as soon as it arrives."

Past the hatch, he saw the swift flash of the lead top dropping over the box. Excitement pounded hotly in his throat.

"I'm going to get rid of these cats once and for all," he called. "Be back in an hour."

"But what about the *Kastil*?"

"We'll worry about the *Kastil* later. Get that ore purified. We're blasting out of here in forty hours."

He swung from the cargo entrance to the top of the lead box. Under his feet, the lid trembled with the frantic struggling of the cats. "Load this crate in the cargo jet," he cried. "And hurry. We only have half an hour left."

The pounding of the jets matched the pounding of the blood in Scott's temples. "When we land," he instructed, "get this crate out fast. Everything de-

pends on how fast you can take the cats down to the pit. I want you to bury it as fast as you can. Understand?''

He glanced sharply about the group, feeling their eyes clinging to him.

''Get as much rubbish on the crate as possible. And then obey every order I give you as fast as possible no matter how foolish the order may seem.''

The jet thundered down over the landing strip, rasped to a halt. ''Out,'' roared Scott. ''Fast. Make it fast.''

The loading compartment swung open. But as the men lifted the crate toward the door, the jet's intercom burst into life. ''Jerill. Jerill, this is Captain Elderburg. I order you to return at once.''

Elderburg had freed himself too quickly.

''This is a criminal offense, Jerill. Come back at once.''

''Get that crate out,'' Scott roared. ''Hurry. Hurry!''

''Mister Jerill,'' blared the intercom. ''You are under arrest, according to the Articles of Space, for conspiracy, armed assault....'' Scott cut the voice off in midsentence. He leaped into the hold, threw his weight behind the box. ''Quick. Get it to the pit.''

The men lumbered off into the darkness. Even with the light gravity of the asteroid, it was difficult to handle the crate as the scrambling cats pitched it from side to side.

Scott scaled a boulder. The hulk of the *Kastil* loomed just beyond, dark and threatening. A thin square of light showed at their cargo entrance. They were still completing loading.

''Hurry,'' Scott muttered feverishly. ''Hurry.''

The men reached the pit. Carefully, slowly, they lowered the crate into the shadows.

Sweat streaming down his face, Scott tore his eyes from the *Kastil* hatch, grimly watched as his men scooped rubbish into the pit.

A motion in the darkness. Out where no motion should be. Movement among the sunless stones.

Scott's breathing stopped.

A group of men closing in toward the cargo jet. Men racing out of the shadows. Men of the *Kastil*.

''Stop,'' Scott shouted frantically into his radio. ''Get that crate back to the jet. Get it out of the pit. Back to the jet. It's too late. Hurry. Hurry!''

For a single astounded moment the men paused. Then, sweeping the rubble from the crate, they fumbled it toward the surface of the pit.

Scott leaped down among them. Pushed. ''They're going to trap us.'' The

crate struck on the pit's edge. Scott seized one end, forced it up over. "Grab that other end, Masters. Move, man. Don't argue. Move!"

Staggering over the uneven ground, they lurched toward the jet.

"I think you ought to rest for a moment." It was the cool voice of Randell, who stepped from the darkness with a blaster turned full on them.

Crewmen from the *Kastil* poured from among the rocks. Their blasters swung a menacing ring about Scott and his men.

"Step back away from the crate." Randell stepped forward, tapped his blaster against the side of the box. "Now what do we have here."

"Keep away from that," Scott snarled. "That's property of the *Bertha*."

"Is it?" Randell turned carelessly to his men. "Property of the *Bertha*," he drawled. "Well, we'd better have a look at it now. To make sure you haven't accidentally salvaged some of the *Kastil's* equipment. Oh, quite by accident, I understand."

He began to loosen the screw-clamps of the lid.

"Stop!" Scott leaped forward, no longer conscious of the weapons swinging on him. He dropped his hand upon the box.

"This is mine," he said. "I forbid you to touch it."

"Have you ever seen a man die of a blaster bolt?" Randell asked. "Step back."

The men of the *Bertha* fell back. Their shoulders touched the toothed rim of stone about the pit.

Randell chuckled. "Perhaps it's just as well we didn't blast off when we were loaded. There was always a chance you'd found something else of value here."

He flicked the muzzle of the blaster about. "If you don't mind, we'll inspect this crate in a better light. Back at the *Kastil*."

Triumph leaped through Scott. "This is piracy," he said, and sounded sincere.

"Piracy is what is proven," Randell laughed. "Do you really think you have a case in our courts?" He sighed softly. "Now, thank you for this unexpected pleasure. And good-bye. We'll see each other again on Earth, perhaps."

Then they were gone and immediately afterward, the *Kastil*, balancing on a white line of flame, leaped away from the asteroid and flashed out past the stars.

Scott stared after it, a faint smile touching his lips. About him rang the triumphant laughter of the crew.

Someone gripped Scott's shoulder. "Captain Elderburg on the intercom, Mister Scott. I just told him. And—congratulations, sir."

Scott grinned. Entering the jet, he faced the intercom, said: "It's over now,

Captain.''

''Good work, Mister Scott.'' Elderburg's voice was unsteady. ''How did you do it?''

''Pretended to be taking something of value,'' Scott said. He relaxed back against the seat. ''I knew Randell couldn't resist making a clean sweep of everything we had. So I gave him the chance.''

Elderburg's laugh filled the cabin. ''And when they open the crate....''

''Good-bye uranium.'' Pale eyes smiling, Scott waved a knotted fist. ''And now, sir, we're going to start mining ore. This is our claim now. And we'll be blasting out of here in forty hours with the biggest load of uranium ore Earth ever got its hands on.''

FELONY

Vogel started with crossword puzzles ... and worked his way up to Man's greatest enigma!

When he was nine, Vogel almost killed another boy who inadvertently scattered his half-completed jigsaw puzzle.

At sixteen, he discovered the mysteries of the Danish Gambit, and cried.

At twenty-two, he crouched in a foxhole on Okinawa, oblivious to the death bursting about him, squinting in a painful ecstasy at the tattered fragment of newspaper on his knee. His sergeant screamed in agony, then died at his elbow. Vogel's face lit up. "Slay," he said happily, scribbling. As crossword puzzles go, it had been a toughie.

At thirty, he was Production Manager of Sachs Fixtures. His men hated him. The General Manager loved him. Tall, gaunt and ruthless, he could glance at any detail print and instantly pinpoint the pattern of final assembly, total man-hour budget and fabrication lead time.

Once, he made a mistake.

On a forty-thousand-dollar job lot he estimated too high on production scrap. When the final assemblies were completed, they had two feet of bulb extension left over. It disturbed him. He spent that evening in his den brooding over chessmen. His wife let him alone.

Next day, he hired Amenth.

Personnel called that morning and apologized. "No experience, but amazing shop aptitude. He's coming down to you for an interview."

"I want," Vogel said into the phone, "three bench men. By noon. *With* shop experience."

Personnel was sorry. Vogel snarled and hung up.

"Hello, please, sir," said a voice.

Vogel stared, icily.

Meekness cowered in front of his desk. Meekness in the form of a small birdlike person with beseeching amber eyes.

"I am Amenth," he said, cringing.

Vogel eyed the olive skin, the cheekbones, the blue-black hair. "A wet-

back," he said. "Three men short and they send me wetbacks. You know sheet metal, buster?"

"I am not of the understanding," Amenth offered. "Experience, no." He beamed. "Aptitude, yes."

Fighting apoplexy, Vogel took him out into the shop. Amenth cringed at the howl of air tools and punch presses. Vogel contemptuously took him by the arm and led him to a workbench where a wizened persimmon of a man performed deft lightnings with rivets and air wrench.

"Benny, this is Amenth. He's new." Vogel pronounced it like a curse. "Get him some goggles from the crib, a rivet gun."

Vogel returned to his office scowling. The phone rang almost instantly.

"Boss," said Benny, "he's from nothing—all thumbs with an air wrench and he don't know alclad from stainless."

"Be right out," Vogel said, hanging up.

Before he had a chance to fire Amenth, the Fabrication Super came in with a production problem. Vogel solved it, but it was almost an hour before he returned to Benny's bench—and stared.

Amenth was a blur of motion. His Keller chattered like a live thing.

A furious sweating Benny snapped at Vogel, "You playing practical jokes? Look, this guy's gone crazy, he's fifty per cent under standard! Tell him to slow down before I file a grievance."

Amenth beamed. "I am of the aptitude," he said.

A queer deep tingle went through Vogel. The crystal delight of challenge he felt when confronted by an apparently impregnable fianchetto.

That was the first day.

A week later, Vogel was compiling a progress report from completed shop travelers. Abruptly he scowled at one traveler, then said, "Charlie!"

"Yes, sir," one of the planners said.

"Why didn't these galley panels go out for drop hammer?"

Charlie peered at the form and whistled. "Somebody must have changed the planning sheet."

"Get me the story!"

Charlie went hurriedly out into the shop.

Some time later he returned with a pale dazed look. "It's this guy in assembly," he said. "Name is Amenth. He didn't even read the traveler. Just looked at the attached detail print and decided to miter the edges, then reverse the flange with a weld." He threw the completed part on Vogel's desk. "Go ahead, check those tolerances," he said whitely. "Right on the money."

Vogel walked over to a calculator and figured. There was a dreamy expression in his eyes. He said softly, "All fabrication in our own shop. A net saving of 93 cents per unit, or eight hundred dollars total. I believe you planned this item, Charlie."

Vogel fired him.

That same afternoon Amenth came into the office on Vogel's order. "Sir?"

"Don't you know how to read a traveler?" Vogel asked sternly.

"It was a lucky accident." Amenth looked terrified. "I just read the print—"

"And did what seemed logical." Statement, then a very quiet question. "What happened to your accent?"

The little man looked blank.

Vogel took a slow deep breath. "I've got a material planning job open," he said tightly. "Three-fifty to start. Interested?"

For a moment he thought Amenth would lick his hand.

The little man took to planning sheets like a duck to water. He pored feverishly over blueprints, turning out travelers in a steady flood.

Vogel watched him. He went over to Personnel, requested Amenth's employment application, read it and scowled. It was a masterpiece of anonymity. Birthplace: New York. Former Occupation: Laborer. Hobbies: None. He memorized Amenth's address and returned the application.

Vogel always ate lunch in the office with his expediters. That noon two of them got into an argument about the planets.

"I say there is life on Mars," Pete Stone insisted stubbornly. "When the polar ice cap melts, the water runs along the canals and traces of green from growing vegetation can be spotted."

"Which proves nothing," Harvey Lamb yawned. Lamb was chief expediter. "Man couldn't live there, anyway. There's not enough oxygen."

"You would be amazed," Amenth said quietly, "at the adaptability of Man."

Vogel set down his thermos and leaned forward. "You mean Martians, for instance, could live here, assuming they existed and had spaceships?"

Amenth's smile was infinitely bitter. "Until they'd go mad."

The talk turned to baseball. Vogel lit his pipe and gave Amenth a surreptitious glance. The little man slumped in the corner, bleak and withdrawn.

This was delicious.

Vogel left the shop and drove across town to Amenth's address. It turned out to be an ancient rooming house on the West Side. Mrs. Reardon, the landlady, was an apathetic woman who brightened when he asked her about Amenth.

"He moved in just three weeks ago." Her face softened in recollection. "He

was like a lost dog coming in out of the rain. Couldn't hardly speak English and he wanted me to trust him for the rent. I must have been crazy." Her nostrils flared. "Not that he hasn't paid up. Are you a cop?"

Vogel nodded as he took out his wallet. In it was his honorary sheriff's badge, but he doubted if the woman would know the difference. She didn't. She led the way upstairs to Amenth's room, worrying, and Vogel assured her they were only looking for a hit-and-run witness, that it was strictly routine.

Amenth's room was incredibly aseptic, barren of pictures, ash trays, dirty laundry, any of the normal masculine debris. Vogel got the stark impression of a convict's cell. In the bleak dresser were two pair of socks, underwear, one tie. In the closet hung one white shirt ... period. Everything wore an indefinable patina of newness. Two books graced the top of the dresser. Vogel recognized one of them, a text on fabrication and design which Amenth had borrowed from his office. The other was a child's primer of English.

"He stays in his room almost every night—reads mostly, and he speaks English much better now," said Mrs. Reardon. "A good tenant—I can't complain—and he's quiet and clean." She described Amenth and Vogel shook his head.

"Our man is about sixty, with a beard," he said. "Funny coincidence. It's a strange name."

Mrs. Reardon agreed.

Vogel drove back to the shop, whistling.

He did not go to his chess club that night, but went to the library instead. He read about Flying Saucers, about space travel, about the possibility of life on other planets. Sometimes he chuckled. Once he frowned deeply and bit his lip.

That night in bed, listening to his wife's shallow breathing, he said, "Alice."

"Yes?"

"Supposing you were lost on a desert island. What would you do?"

"I'd build a raft," she said sleepily.

Vogel smiled into the darkness.

Next day he made a systematic tour of the stockroom, scanning the racks of completed sub-assemblies, the gleaming fixture components, the rows of panels, brackets, extrusions, all waiting like soldiers to march from the stockroom into final assembly.

Vogel suddenly grunted.

There, half hidden behind a row of stainless-steel basin assemblies, was a nine-inch bowl. He examined it. The bowl was heavy and shiny. There was no part number stamp, and the metal was not alclad, not stainless, not cad nor zinc. Five small copper discs had been welded to the lower flange.

Vogel carefully scraped off a sample with a file. Then he replaced the part

in the stock rack and went into his office where he placed the sample in an envelope.

That afternoon he ranged the shop like a hound.

In the shipping crib, he found a half-completed detail that struck a chord of strangeness. Two twisted copper vanes with a crumpled shop traveler signed by Amenth. The next operation specified furnace braze. Vogel squinted at the attached detail print. It was a current job number.

He spent the next two hours in the ozalid room, leafing through the print files. The job number called for a deep-freeze showcase, and there were exactly two hundred and seven detail drawings involved.

Not one of them matched the print in shipping.

After an almost silent dinner at home, he sat smoking his pipe, waiting for the phone to ring. It rang at eight.

"It's platinum," Carstairs said. Tim Carstairs was a night-shift chemist. "Anything wrong, Mr. Vogel?"

"No." Vogel paused. "Thanks, Tim." He hung up, glanced at his fingers. They were shaking.

"You," Alice said, "look ready to call mate in three."

"I'm going over to the shop," he said, kissing her. "Don't wait up."

He was not surprised to see the light on in the parts control section. Amenth was writing planning sheets.

"I don't believe we authorized overtime," Vogel told him mildly, hanging up his coat.

"Just loose ends." Amenth's smile was nervous. "Tying up these burden charts. I'm on my own time."

"Thought I'd set up next month's budget." Vogel sat at his desk. "By the way, what did you do before you came here?"

"Odd jobs." Amenth's lips twitched.

"Your family live on the coast?"

Sweat glistened on the little man's forehead. "Ah—no. My folks passed on years ago."

Cat and mouse.

"You've done good work lately." Vogel yawned, studying the progress chart on the wall. Behind him he heard a soft exhalation of relief, the furtive rustle of papers as Amenth cleaned off his desk.

When Amenth finally left, Vogel went over to his desk and methodically ransacked the work in process file. It took him two hours to find what he was looking for.

One: A schematic detail on graph paper which resembled no type of circuit Vogel had ever seen.

Two: Fourteen completed shop travelers on which were typed clearly, *Call Amenth upon completion*. That was not unusual; most expediters wanted to be notified when a hot part hit Inspection. The unusual part was that no inspection stamp had been placed opposite the final operation of *Inspect*, *Identify*, *Return to Stock*. Ergo, Amenth had inspected and stocked the parts himself.

Three: A progress chart with dates, indicating four detail parts still remaining in fabrication. Final assembly date—tomorrow!

The following afternoon, Vogel sat alone in the conference room. The door opened and Amenth came in. "You sent for me, sir?"

"Sit down, Amenth. Let's talk a while."

Amenth sat down uneasily.

"We're considering you for promotion," Vogel said, silencing the little man's protests with a deprecating wave. "But we've got to know if you're ready. Let's talk about your job."

Amenth relaxed.

They talked shop for a few moments, then Vogel opened a folder, took out his watch. "Very good," he said. "Now let's check your initiative potential." As Amenth stiffened, Vogel reassured him, "Relax. It's a routine association test."

For the next ten minutes he timed Amenth's responses with a stop watch. Most of the words were familiar shop words and most of the responses were standard.

"*Job.*"

"Escape," Amenth said instantly.

"*Blueprint.*"

"Create."

"*Noise.*"

"Hate."

"*Want.*"

"Home!"

It was all so childish, so obvious, and Amenth's eyes were frightened amber pools when Vogel dismissed him. No matter. Let him suspect. Vogel studied the reaction results with grim amusement.

Outside, the shop roared.

And Amenth's travelers sped the rounds: Issue material; Shear to size; Form on brake; Weld per print; Miter, drill, inspect, stock. One by one, the strange details were being formed, finished, to lie inert in the stockroom, to await final

assembly.

Assembly.

Of *what*?

Tonight was project completion.

Midnight.

Vogel stood in darkness, leaning against the wall. He was tired. He had maintained this vigil for three hours. His right leg was numb and he started to shift position, then froze as he heard footsteps. Three aisles over, a light exploded, blindingly. He held his breath.

From outside in fabrication came the muffled clang of drill press and power brake, the sounds of the night shift. He waited. Three aisles over, something moved. Someone fumbled in the stock bins, collecting shaped pieces of metal, grunting with the effort of piling them on the salvage bench, now panting with impatience while assembling the parts. There was a hammering, a fitting together, a flash of light, a humming of power and finally a sob of relief.

Vogel's hand slipped into his coat pocket and grasped the gun. He moved silently.

Amenth stood at the salvage bench, adjusting studs and connecting terminals. Vogel stared at the final assembly.

It was a helmet. A large silvery helmet, connected to a nightmarish maze of wiring, mounted on a rectangular plastic base. It hummed, although there was no visible source of power. Amenth put on the helmet with a feverish haste. Vogel chuckled. Amenth stood motionless. Then as his hand darted toward a stand, Vogel said sharply, "Don't!"

Amenth stared at the gun.

"Take it off!" Vogel's voice was iron.

Amenth slowly took off the helmet. His eyes were golden with tears. "Please," he said.

"Mars or Venus?" Vogel said. "Which?"

"N-neither. You could not grasp the concept. Let me go. Please!"

"Where?" Vogel prodded. "Another dimension?"

"You would call it that," the alien whispered. Hope brightened his face. "You want something? Wealth? Power?"

It was the way he said the words, like a white trader offering his aborigine captors glass beads to set him free.

Vogel nodded toward the circuit. "That hookup—you tap the gravitational field direct? Cosmic rays?"

"Your planet's magnet force lines. Look, I'll leave you the schematic dia-

gram. It's simple, really. You can use it to transmute—'' He babbled on with a heartbreaking eagerness, and Vogel listened.

''In my own world,'' said Amenth brokenly, ''I am a moron. A criminal moron. Once, out of a childish malice, I destroyed beauty. One of the singing crystals.'' He shuddered. ''I was punished. They sent me here—to the snake pit. Sentence for felony. This—'' he indicated the helmet—''would have fused three seconds after I used it. So, incidentally, would this entire shop. I had no time to construct a feedback dispersion.''

''Tell me about your world,'' Vogel said.

Amenth told him.

Vogel's breath hissed softly between his teeth. All his life an unformed vision had tormented him, driven him toward perfection. Abruptly the vision was reality. He smiled, moved forward. ''You shouldn't have told me.''

Amenth saw the intent in his eyes and started to beg. Vogel clipped him behind the ear.

He put the helmet on, gingerly. The electrodes tingled against his temple and his grin was wry as he thought of Alice. Then he depressed the stud.

Vogel sobbed.

Color blinded him, rainbows blared in sweet, sparkling thunder. He whimpered, covering his eyes. The music drowned him in a fugue of weeping delight. Slowly he raised his head.

He stood ankle-deep in gold crystals that stretched out forever in a splendid sea of flame. The crystals sang softly, achingly, to a silver sun in an emerald sky. A grove of blue needle trees tinkled in ecstasy on his left. And beyond those trees....

The city sang.

White spires foamed skyward in impossible cataracts of glory. A glissando of joy burned his eardrums, and he could not face that living splendor. It was the city beyond dreams, beyond legend, the city where all dreams end. He strode toward it, raptly.

The crystals screamed. The blue needle forest lashed wildly, and terror shivered through the air in shrieking dissonance.

From the blue forest, people ran. Beautiful people, with great golden eyes and scarlet tunics. They could have been Amenth's brothers and sisters. They stared, horror and revulsion twisting their faces. They started toward him.

Vogel understood.

If destroying beauty on this world was a crime, then killing ugliness must be a duty.

On this world, he was ugly—

FLIGHT FROM TOMORROW

There was no stopping General Zarvas' rebellion

But yesterday, a whole planet had shouted: Today, they were screaming:

The Palace, where Hradzka, surrounded by his sycophants and guards, had lorded it over a solar system, was now an inferno. Those who had been too closely identified with the dictator's rule to hope for forgiveness were fighting to the last, seeking only a quick death in combat; one by one, their isolated points of resistance were being wiped out. The corridors and chambers of the huge palace were thronged with rebels, loud with their shouts, and with the rasping hiss of heat-beams and the crash of blasters, reeking with the stench of scorched plastic and burned flesh, of hot metal and charred fabric. The living quarters were overrun; the mob smashed down walls and tore up floors in search of secret hiding-places. They found strange things—the space-ship that had been built under one of the domes, in readiness for flight to the still-loyal colonies on Mars or the Asteroid Belt, for instance—but Hradzka himself they could not find.

At last, the search reached the New Tower which reared its head five thousand feet above the palace, the highest thing in the city. They blasted down the huge steel doors, cut the power from the energy-screens. They landed from antigrav-cars on the upper levels. But except for barriers of metal and concrete and energy, they met with no opposition. Finally, they came to the spiral stairway which led up to the great metal sphere which capped the whole structure.

General Zarvas, the Army Commander who had placed himself at the head of the revolt, stood with his foot on the lowest step, his followers behind him. There was Prince Burvanny, the leader of the old nobility, and Ghorzesko Orhm, the merchant, and between them stood Tobbh, the chieftain of the mutinous slaves. There were clerks; laborers; poor but haughty nobles: and wealthy merchants who had long been forced to hide their riches from the dictator's tax-gatherers, and soldiers, and spacemen.

"You'd better let some of us go first sir," General Zarvas' orderly, a blood-stained bandage about his head, his uniform in rags, suggested. "You don't know

what might be up there.''

The General shook his head. ''I'll go first.'' Zarvas Pol was not the man to send subordinates into danger ahead of himself. ''To tell the truth, I'm afraid we won't find anything at all up there.''

''You mean...?'' Ghorzesko Orhm began.

''The 'time-machine','' Zarvas Pol replied. ''If he's managed to get it finished, the Great Mind only knows where he may be, now. Or when.''

He loosened the blaster in his holster and started up the long spiral. His followers spread out, below; sharp-shooters took position to cover his ascent. Prince Burvanny and Tobbh the Slave started to follow him. They hesitated as each motioned the other to precede him; then the nobleman followed the general, his blaster drawn, and the brawny slave behind him.

The door at the top was open, and Zarvas Pol stepped through but there was nothing in the great spherical room except a raised dais some fifty feet in diameter, its polished metal top strangely clean and empty. And a crumpled heap of burned cloth and charred flesh that had, not long ago, been a man. An old man with a white beard, and the seven-pointed star of the Learned Brothers on his breast, advanced to meet the armed intruders.

''So he is gone, Kradzy Zago?'' Zarvas Pol said, holstering his weapon. ''Gone in the 'time-machine', to hide in yesterday or tomorrow. And you let him go?''

The old one nodded. ''He had a blaster, and I had none.'' He indicated the body on the floor. ''Zoldy Jarv had no blaster, either, but he tried to stop Hradzka. See, he squandered his life as a fool squanders his money, getting nothing for it. And a man's life is not money, Zarvas Pol.''

''I do not blame you, Kradzy Zago,'' General Zarvas said. ''But now you must get to work, and build us another 'time-machine', so that we can hunt him down.''

''Does revenge mean so much to you, then?''

The soldier made an impatient gesture. ''Revenge is for fools, like that pack of screaming beasts below. I do not kill for revenge; I kill because dead men do no harm.''

''Hradzka will do us no more harm,'' the old scientist replied. ''He is a thing of yesterday; of a time long past and half-lost in the mists of legend.''

''No matter. As long as he exists, at any point in space-time, Hradzka is still a threat. Revenge means much to Hradzka; he will return for it, when we least expect him.''

The old man shook his head. ''No, Zarvas Pol, Hradzka will not return.''

Hradzka holstered his blaster, threw the switch that sealed the ''time-machine'', put on the antigrav-unit and started the time-shift unit. He reached out and set the destination-dial for the mid-Fifty-Second Century of the Atomic Era. That

would land him in the Ninth Age of Chaos, following the Two-Century War and the collapse of the World Theocracy. A good time for his purpose: the world would be slipping back into barbarism, and yet possess the technologies of former civilizations. A hundred little national states would be trying to regain social stability, competing and warring with one another. Hradzka glanced back over his shoulder at the cases of books, record-spools, tri-dimensional pictures, and scale-models. These people of the past would welcome him and his science of the future, would make him their leader.

He would start in a small way, by taking over the local feudal or tribal government, would arm his followers with weapons of the future. Then he would impose his rule upon neighboring tribes, or princedoms, or communes, or whatever, and build a strong sovereignty; from that he envisioned a world empire, a Solar System empire.

Then, he would build "time-machines", many "time-machines". He would recruit an army such as the universe had never seen, a swarm of men from every age in the past. At that point, he would return to the Hundredth Century of the Atomic Era, to wreak vengeance upon those who had risen against him. A slow smile grew on Hradzka's thin lips as he thought of the tortures with which he would put Zarvas Pol to death.

He glanced up at the great disc of the indicator and frowned. Already he was back to the year 7500, A.E., and the temporal-displacement had not begun to slow. The disc was turning even more rapidly—7000, 6000, 5500; he gasped slightly. Then he had passed his destination; he was now in the Fortieth Century, but the indicator was slowing. The hairline crossed the Thirtieth Century, the Twentieth, the Fifteenth, the Tenth. He wondered what had gone wrong, but he had recovered from his fright by this time. When this insane machine stopped, as it must around the First Century of the Atomic Era, he would investigate, make repairs, then shift forward to his target-point. Hradzka was determined upon the Fifty-Second Century; he had made a special study of the history of that period, had learned the language spoken then, and he understood the methods necessary to gain power over the natives of that time.

The indicator-disc came to a stop, in the First Century. He switched on the magnifier and leaned forward to look; he had emerged into normal time in the year 10 of the Atomic Era, a decade after the first uranium-pile had gone into operation, and seven years after the first atomic bombs had been exploded in warfare. The altimeter showed that he was hovering at eight thousand feet above ground-level.

Slowly, he cut out the antigrav, letting the "time machine" down easily. He knew that there had been no danger of materializing inside anything; the New Tower had been built to put it above anything that had occupied that space-point

at any moment within history, or legend, or even the geological knowledge of man. What lay below, however, was uncertain. It was night—the visi-screen showed only a star-dusted, moonless-sky, and dark shadows below. He snapped another switch; for a few micro-seconds a beam of intense light was turned on, automatically photographing the landscape under him. A second later, the developed picture was projected upon another screen; it showed only wooded mountains and a barren, brush-grown valley.

The "time-machine" came to rest with a soft jar and a crashing of broken bushes that was audible through the sound pickup. Hradzka pulled the main switch; there was a click as the shielding went out and the door opened. A breath of cool night air drew into the hollow sphere.

Then there was a loud inside the mechanism, and a flash of blue-white light which turned to pinkish flame with a nasty crackling. Curls of smoke began to rise from the square black box that housed the "time-shift" mechanism, and from behind the instrument-board. In a moment, everything was glowing-hot: driblets of aluminum and silver were running down from the instruments. Then the whole interior of the "time-machine" was afire; there was barely time for Hradzka to leap through the open door.

The brush outside impeded him, and he used his blaster to clear a path for himself away from the big sphere, which was now glowing faintly on the outside. The heat grew in intensity, and the brush outside was taking fire. It was not until he had gotten two hundred yards from the machine that he stopped, realizing what had happened.

The machine, of course, had been sabotaged. That would have been young Zoldy, whom he had killed, or that old billy-goat, Kradzy Zago; the latter, most likely. He cursed both of them for having marooned him in this savage age, at the very beginning of atomic civilization, with all his printed and recorded knowledge destroyed. Oh, he could still gain mastery over these barbarians; he knew enough to fashion a crude blaster, or a heat-beam gun, or an atomic-electric conversion unit. But without his books and records, he could never build an antigrav unit, and the secret of the "temporal shift" was lost.

For "Time" is not an object, or a medium which can be travelled along. The "Time-Machine" was not a vehicle; it was a mechanical process of displacement within the space-time continuum, and those who constructed it knew that it could not be used with the sort of accuracy that the dials indicated. Hradzka had ordered his scientists to produce a "Time Machine", and they had combined the possible—displacement within the space-time continuum—with the sort of fiction the dictator demanded, for their own well-being. Even had there been no sabotage, his return to his own "time" was nearly of zero probability.

The fire, spreading from the "time-machine", was blowing toward him; he

observed the wind-direction and hurried around out of the path of the flames. The light enabled him to pick his way through the brush, and, after crossing a small stream, he found a rutted road and followed it up the mountainside until he came to a place where he could rest concealed until morning.

It was broad daylight when he woke, and there was a strange throbbing sound; Hradzka lay motionless under the brush where he had slept, his blaster ready. In a few minutes, a vehicle came into sight, following the road down the mountainside.

It was a large thing, four-wheeled, with a projection in front which probably housed the engine and a cab for the operator. The body of the vehicle was simply an open rectangular box. There were two men in the cab, and about twenty or thirty more crowded into the box body. These were dressed in faded and nondescript garments of blue and gray and brown; all were armed with crude weapons—axes, bill-hooks, long-handled instruments with serrated edges, and what looked like broad-bladed spears. The vehicle itself, which seemed to be propelled by some sort of chemical-explosion engine, was dingy and mud-splattered; the men in it were ragged and unshaven. Hradzka snorted in contempt; they were probably warriors of the local tribe, going to the fire in the belief that it had been started by raiding enemies. When they found the wreckage of the "time-machine", they would no doubt believe that it was the chariot of some god and drag it home to be venerated.

A plan of action was taking shape in his mind. First, he must get clothing of the sort worn by these people, and find a safe hiding-place for his own things. Then, pretending to be a deaf-mute, he would go among them to learn something of their customs and pick up the language. When he had done that, he would move on to another tribe or village, able to tell a credible story for himself. For a while, it would be necessary for him to do menial work, but in the end, he would establish himself among these people. Then he could gather around him a faction of those who were dissatisfied with whatever conditions existed, organize a conspiracy, make arms for his followers, and start his program of power-seizure.

The matter of clothing was attended to shortly after he had crossed the mountain and descended into the valley on the other side. Hearing a clinking sound some distance from the road, as of metal striking stone, Hradzka stole cautiously through the woods until he came within sight of a man who was digging with a mattock, uprooting small bushes of a particular sort, with rough gray bark and three-pointed leaves. When he had dug one up, he would cut off the roots and then slice away the root-bark with a knife, putting it into a sack. Hradzka's lip curled contemptuously; the fellow was gathering the stuff for medicinal use. He had heard of the use of roots and herbs for such purposes by the ancient savages.

The blaster would be no use here; it was too powerful, and would destroy

the clothing that the man was wearing. He unfastened a strap from his belt and attached it to a stone to form a hand-loop, then, inched forward behind the lone herb-gatherer. When he was close enough, he straightened and rushed forward, swinging his improvised weapon. The man heard him and turned, too late.

After undressing his victim, Hradzka used the mattock to finish him, and then to dig a grave. The fugitive buried his own clothes with the murdered man, and donned the faded blue shirt, rough shoes, worn trousers and jacket. The blaster he concealed under the jacket, and he kept a few other Hundredth Century gadgets; these he would hide somewhere closer to his center of operations.

He had kept, among other things, a small box of food-concentrate capsules, and in one pocket of the newly acquired jacket he found a package containing food. It was rough and unappetizing fare—slices of cold cooked meat between slices of some cereal substance. He ate these before filling in the grave, and put the paper wrappings in with the dead man. Then, his work finished, he threw the mattock into the brush and set out again, grimacing disgustedly and scratching himself. The clothing he had appropriated was verminous.

Crossing another mountain, he descended into a second valley, and, for a time, lost his way among a tangle of narrow ravines. It was dark by the time he mounted a hill and found himself looking down another valley, in which a few scattered lights gave evidence of human habitations. Not wishing to arouse suspicion by approaching these in the night-time, he found a place among some young evergreens where he could sleep.

The next morning, having breakfasted on a concentrate capsule, he found a hiding-place for his blaster in a hollow tree. It was in a sufficiently prominent position so that he could easily find it again, and at the same time unlikely to be discovered by some native. Then he went down into the inhabited valley.

He was surprised at the ease with which he established contact with the natives. The first dwelling which he approached, a cluster of farm-buildings at the upper end of the valley, gave him shelter. There was a man, clad in the same sort of rough garments Hradzka had taken from the body of the herb-gatherer, and a woman in a faded and shapeless dress. The man was thin and work-bent; the woman short and heavy. Both were past middle age.

He made inarticulate sounds to attract their attention, then gestured to his mouth and ears to indicate his assumed affliction. He rubbed his stomach to portray hunger. Looking about, he saw an ax sticking in a chopping-block, and a pile of wood near it, probably the fuel used by these people. He took the ax, split up some of the wood, then repeated the hunger-signs. The man and the woman both nodded, laughing; he was shown a pile of tree-limbs, and the man picked up a short billet of wood and used it like a measuring-rule, to indicate that all the wood was to be cut to that length.

Hradzka fell to work, and by mid-morning, he had all the wood cut. He had seen a circular stone, mounted on a trestle with a metal axle through it, and judged it to be some sort of a grinding-wheel, since it was fitted with a foot-pedal and a rusty metal can was set above it to spill water onto the grinding-edge. After chopping the wood, he carefully sharpened the ax, handing it to the man for inspection. This seemed to please the man; he clapped Hradzka on the shoulder, making commendatory sounds.

It required considerable time and ingenuity to make himself a more or less permanent member of the household. Hradzka had made a survey of the farmyard, noting the sorts of work that would normally be performed on the farm, and he pantomimed this work in its simpler operations. He pointed to the east, where the sun would rise, and to the zenith, and to the west. He made signs indicative of eating, and of sleeping, and of rising, and of working. At length, he succeeded in conveying his meaning.

There was considerable argument between the man and the woman, but his proposal was accepted, as he expected that it would. It was easy to see that the work of the farm was hard for this aging couple; now, for a place to sleep and a little food, they were able to acquire a strong and intelligent slave.

In the days that followed, he made himself useful to the farm people; he fed the chickens and the livestock, milked the cow, worked in the fields. He slept in a small room at the top of the house, under the eaves, and ate with the man and woman in the farmhouse kitchen.

It was not long before he picked up a few words which he had heard his employers using, and related them to the things or acts spoken of. And he began to notice that these people, in spite of the crudities of their own life, enjoyed some of the advantages of a fairly complex civilization. Their implements were not handcraft products, but showed machine workmanship. There were two objects hanging on hooks on the kitchen wall which he was sure were weapons. Both had wooden shoulder-stocks, and wooden fore-pieces; they had long tubes extending to the front, and triggers like blasters. One had double tubes mounted side-by-side, and double triggers; the other had an octagonal tube mounted over a round tube, and a loop extension on the trigger-guard. Then, there was a box on the kitchen wall, with a mouthpiece and a cylindrical tube on a cord. Sometimes a bell would ring out of the box, and the woman would go to this instrument, take down the tube and hold it to her ear, and talk into the mouthpiece. There was another box from which voices would issue, of people conversing, or of orators, or of singing, and sometimes instrumental music. None of these were objects made by savages; these people probably traded with some fairly high civilization. They were not illiterate; he found printed matter, indicating the use of some phonetic alphabet, and paper pamphlets containing printed reproductions of photographs

as well as verbal text.

There was also a vehicle on the farm, powered, like the one he had seen on the road, by an engine in which a hydrocarbon liquid-fuel was exploded. He made it his business to examine this minutely, and to study its construction and operation until he was thoroughly familiar with it.

It was not until the third day after his arrival that the chickens began to die. In the morning, Hradzka found three of them dead when he went to feed them, the rest drooping unhealthily; he summoned the man and showed him what he had found. The next morning, they were all dead, and the cow was sick. She gave bloody milk, that evening, and the next morning she lay in her stall and would not get up.

The man and the woman were also beginning to sicken, though both of them tried to continue their work. It was the woman who first noticed that the plants around the farmhouse were withering and turning yellow.

The farmer went to the stable with Hradzka and looked at the cow. Shaking his head, he limped back to the house, and returned carrying one of the weapons from the kitchen—the one with the single trigger and the octagonal tube. As he entered the stable, he jerked down and up on the loop extension of the trigger-guard, then put the weapon to his shoulder and pointed it at the cow. It made a flash, and roared louder even than a hand-blaster, and the cow jerked convulsively and was dead. The man then indicated by signs that Hradzka was to drag the dead cow out of the stable, dig a hole, and bury it. This Hradzka did, carefully examining the wound in the cow's head—the weapon, he decided, was not an energy-weapon, but a simple solid-missile projector.

By evening, neither the man nor the woman were able to eat, and both seemed to be suffering intensely. The man used the communicating-instrument on the wall, probably calling on his friends for help. Hradzka did what he could to make them comfortable, cooked his own meal, washed the dishes as he had seen the woman doing, and tidied up the kitchen.

It was not long before people, men and women whom he had seen on the road or who had stopped at the farmhouse while he had been there, began arriving, some carrying baskets of food; and shortly after Hradzka had eaten, a vehicle like the farmer's, but in better condition and of better quality, arrived and a young man got out of it and entered the house, carrying a leather bag. He was apparently some sort of a scientist; he examined the man and his wife, asked many questions, and administered drugs. He also took samples for blood-tests and urinalysis. This, Hradzka considered, was another of the many contradictions he had encountered among these people—this man behaved like an educated scientist, and seemingly had nothing in common with the peasant herb-gatherer on the mountainside.

The fact was that Hradzka was worried. The strange death of the animals, the blight which had smitten the trees and vegetables around the farm, and the sickness of the farmer and his woman, all mystified him. He did not know of any disease which would affect plants and animals and humans; he wondered if some poisonous gas might not be escaping from the earth near the farmhouse. However, he had not, himself, been affected. He also disliked the way in which the doctor and the neighbors seemed to be talking about him. While he had come to a considerable revision of his original opinion about the culture-level of these people, it was not impossible that they might suspect him of having caused the whole thing by witchcraft; at any moment, they might fall upon him and put him to death. In any case, there was no longer any use in his staying here, and it might be wise if he left at once.

Accordingly, he filled his pockets with food from the pantry and slipped out of the farmhouse; before his absence was discovered he was well on his way down the road.

That night, Hradzka slept under a bridge across a fairly wide stream; the next morning, he followed the road until he came to a town. It was not a large place; there were perhaps four or five hundred houses and other buildings in it. Most of these were dwellings like the farmhouse where he had been staying, but some were much larger, and seemed to be places of business. One of these latter was a concrete structure with wide doors at the front; inside, he could see men working on the internal-combustion vehicles which seemed to be in almost universal use. Hradzka decided to obtain employment here.

It would be best, he decided, to continue his pretense of being a deaf-mute. He did not know whether a world-language were in use at this time or not, and even if not, the pretense of being a foreigner unable to speak the local dialect might be dangerous. So he entered the vehicle-repair shop and accosted a man in a clean shirt who seemed to be issuing instructions to the workers, going into his pantomime of the homeless mute seeking employment.

The master of the repair-shop merely laughed at him, however. Hradzka became more insistent in his manner, making signs to indicate his hunger and willingness to work. The other men in the shop left their tasks and gathered around; there was much laughter and unmistakably ribald and derogatory remarks. Hradzka was beginning to give up hope of getting employment here when one of the workmen approached the master and whispered something to him.

The two of them walked away, conversing in low voices. Hradzka thought he understood the situation; no doubt the workman, thinking to lighten his own labor, was urging that the vagrant be employed, for no other pay than food and lodging. At length, the master assented to his employee's urgings; he returned, showed Hradzka a hose and a bucket and sponges and cloths, and set him to work

cleaning the mud from one of the vehicles. Then, after seeing that the work was being done properly, he went away, entering a room at one side of the shop.

About twenty minutes later, another man entered the shop. He was not dressed like any of the other people whom Hradzka had seen; he wore a gray tunic and breeches, polished black boots, and a cap with a visor and a metal insignia on it; on a belt, he carried a holstered weapon like a blaster.

After speaking to one of the workers, who pointed Hradzka out to him, he approached the fugitive and said something. Hradzka made gestures at his mouth and ears and made gargling sounds; the newcomer shrugged and motioned him to come with him, at the same time producing a pair of handcuffs from his belt and jingling them suggestively.

In a few seconds, Hradzka tried to analyze the situation and estimate its possibilities. The newcomer was a soldier, or, more likely, a policeman, since manacles were a part of his equipment. Evidently, since the evening before, a warning had been made public by means of communicating devices such as he had seen at the farm, advising people that a man of his description, pretending to be a deaf-mute, should be detained and the police notified; it had been for that reason that the workman had persuaded his master to employ Hradzka. No doubt he would be accused of causing the conditions at the farm by sorcery.

Hradzka shrugged and nodded, then went to the water-tap to turn off the hose he had been using. He disconnected it, coiled it and hung it up, and then picked up the water-bucket. Then, without warning, he hurled the water into the policeman's face, sprang forward, swinging the bucket by the bale, and hit the man on the head. Releasing his grip on the bucket, he tore the blaster or whatever it was from the holster.

One of the workers swung a hammer, as though to throw it. Hradzka aimed the weapon at him and pulled the trigger; the thing belched fire and kicked back painfully in his hand, and the man fell. He used it again to drop the policeman, then thrust it into the waistband of his trousers and ran outside. The thing was not a blaster at all, he realized—only a missile-projector like the big weapons at the farm, utilizing the force of some chemical explosive.

The policeman's vehicle was standing outside. It was a small, single-seat, two wheeled affair. Having become familiar with the principles of these hydrocarbon engines from examination of the vehicle of the farm, and accustomed as he was to far more complex mechanisms than this crude affair, Hradzka could see at a glance how to operate it. Springing onto the saddle, he kicked away the folding support and started the engine. Just as he did, the master of the repair-shop ran outside, one of the small hand-weapons in his hand, and fired several shots. They all missed, but Hradzka heard the whining sound of the missiles passing uncomfortably close to him.

It was imperative that he recover the blaster he had hidden in the hollow tree at the head of the valley. By this time, there would be a concerted search under way for him, and he needed a better weapon than the solid-missile projector he had taken from the policeman. He did not know how many shots the thing contained, but if it propelled solid missiles by chemical explosion, there could not have been more than five or six such charges in the cylindrical part of the weapon which he had assumed to be the charge-holder. On the other hand, his blaster, a weapon of much greater power, contained enough energy for five hundred blasts, and with it were eight extra energy-capsules, giving him a total of four thousand five hundred blasts.

Handling the two-wheeled vehicle was no particular problem; although he had never ridden on anything of the sort before, it was child's play compared to controlling a Hundredth Century strato-rocket, and Hradzka was a skilled rocket-pilot.

Several times he passed vehicles on the road—the passenger vehicles with enclosed cabins, and cargo-vehicles piled high with farm produce. Once he encountered a large number of children, gathered in front of a big red building with a flagstaff in front, from which a queer flag, with horizontal red and white stripes and a white-spotted blue device in the corner, flew. They scattered off the road in terror at his approach; fortunately, he hit none of them, for at the speed at which he was traveling, such a collision would have wrecked his light vehicle.

As he approached the farm where he had spent the past few days, he saw two passenger-vehicles standing by the road. One was a black one, similar to the one in which the physician had come to the farm, and the other was white with black trimmings and bore the same device he had seen on the cap of the policeman. A policeman was sitting in the driver's seat of this vehicle, and another policeman was standing beside it, breathing smoke with one of the white paper cylinders these people used. In the farm-yard, two men were going about with a square black box; to this box, a tube was connected by a wire, and they were passing the tube about over the ground.

The policeman who was standing beside the vehicle saw him approach, and blew his whistle, then drew the weapon from his belt. Hradzka, who had been expecting some attempt to halt him, had let go the right-hand steering handle and drawn his own weapon; as the policeman drew, he fired at him. Without observing the effect of the shot, he sped on; before he had rounded the bend above the farm, several shots were fired after him.

A mile beyond, he came to the place where he had hidden the blaster. He stopped the vehicle and jumped off, plunging into the brush and racing toward the hollow tree. Just as he reached it, he heard a vehicle approach and stop, and the door of the police vehicle slam. Hradzka's fingers found the belt of his blaster;

he dragged it out and buckled it on, tossing away the missile weapon he had been carrying.

Then, crouching behind the tree, he waited. A few moments later, he caught a movement in the brush toward the road. He brought up the blaster, aimed and squeezed the trigger. There was a faint bluish glow at the muzzle, and a blast of energy tore through the brush, smashing the molecular structure of everything that stood in the way. There was an involuntary shout of alarm from the direction of the road; at least one of the policemen had escaped the blast. Hradzka holstered his weapon and crept away for some distance, keeping under cover, then turned and waited for some sign of the presence of his enemies. For some time nothing happened; he decided to turn hunter against the men who were hunting him. He started back in the direction of the road, making a wide circle, flitting silently from rock to bush and from bush to tree, stopping often to look and listen.

This finally brought him upon one of the policemen, and almost terminated his flight at the same time. He must have grown over-confident and careless; suddenly a weapon roared, and a missile smashed through the brush inches from his face. The shot had come from his left and a little to the rear. Whirling, he blasted four times, in rapid succession, then turned and fled for a few yards, dropping and crawling behind a rock. When he looked back, he could see wisps of smoke rising from the shattered trees and bushes which had absorbed the energy-output of his weapon, and he caught a faint odor of burned flesh. One of his pursuers, at least, would pursue him no longer.

He slipped away, down into the tangle of ravines and hollows in which he had wandered the day before his arrival at the farm. For the time being, he felt safe, and finally confident that he was not being pursued, he stopped to rest. The place where he stopped seemed familiar, and he looked about. In a moment, he recognized the little stream, the pool where he had bathed his feet, the clump of seedling pines under which he had slept. He even found the silver-foil wrapping from the food concentrate capsule.

But there had been a change, since the night when he had slept here. Then the young pines had been green and alive; now they were blighted, and their needles had turned brown. Hradzka stood for a long time, looking at them. It was the same blight that had touched the plants around the farmhouse. And here, among the pine needles on the ground, lay a dead bird.

It took some time for him to admit, to himself, the implications of vegetation, the chickens, the cow, the farmer and his wife, had all sickened and died. He had been in this place, and now, when he had returned, he found that death had followed him here, too.

During the early centuries of the Atomic Era, he knew, there had been great wars, the stories of which had survived even to the Hundredth Century. Among

the weapons that had been used, there had been artificial plagues and epidemics, caused by new types of bacteria developed in laboratories, against which the victims had possessed no protection. Those germs and viruses had persisted for centuries, and gradually had lost their power to harm mankind. Suppose, now, that he had brought some of them back with him, to a century before they had been developed. Suppose, that was, that he were a human plague-carrier. He thought of the vermin that had infested the clothing he had taken from the man he had killed on the other side of the mountain; they had not troubled him after the first day.

There was a throbbing mechanical sound somewhere in the air; he looked about, and finally identified its source. A small aircraft had come over the valley from the other side of the mountain and was circling lazily overhead. He froze, shrinking back under a pine-tree; as long as he remained motionless, he would not be seen, and soon the thing would go away. He was beginning to understand why the search for him was being pressed so relentlessly; as long as he remained alive, he was a menace to everybody in this First Century world.

He got out his supply of food concentrates, saw that he had only three capsules left, and put them away again. For a long time, he sat under the dying tree, chewing on a twig and thinking. There must be some way in which he could overcome, or even utilize, his inherent deadliness to these people. He might find some isolated community, conceal himself near it, invade it at night and infect it, and then, when everybody was dead, move in and take it for himself. But was there any such isolated community? The farmhouse where he had worked had been fairly remote, yet its inhabitants had been in communication with the outside world, and the physician had come immediately in response to their call for help.

The little aircraft had been circling overhead, directly above the place where he lay hidden. For a while, Hradzka was afraid it had spotted him, and was debating the advisability of using his blaster on it. Then it banked, turned and went away. He watched it circle over the valley on the other side of the mountain, and got to his feet.

Almost at once, there was a new sound—a multiple throbbing, at a quick, snarling tempo that hinted at enormous power, growing louder each second. Hradzka stiffened and drew his blaster; as he did, five more aircraft swooped over the crest of the mountain and came rushing down toward him; not aimlessly, but as though they knew exactly where he was. As they approached, the leading edges of their wings sparkled with light, branches began flying from the trees about him, and there was a loud hammering noise.

He aimed a little in front of them and began blasting. A wing flew from one of the aircraft, and it plunged downward. Another came apart in the air; a third burst into flames. The other two zoomed upward quickly. Hradzka swung his blaster

after them, blasting again and again. He hit a fourth with a blast of energy, knocking it to pieces, and then the fifth was out of range. He blasted at it twice, but without effect; a hand-blaster was only good for a thousand yards at the most.

Holstering his weapon, he hurried away, following the stream and keeping under cover of trees. The last of the attacking aircraft had gone away, but the little scout-plane was still circling about, well out of blaster-range.

Once or twice, Hradzka was compelled to stay hidden for some time, not knowing the nature of the pilot's ability to detect him. It was during one of these waits that the next phase of the attack developed.

It began, like the last one, with a distant roar that swelled in volume until it seemed to fill the whole world. Then, fifteen or twenty thousand feet out of blaster-range, the new attackers swept into sight.

There must have been fifty of them, huge tapering things with wide-spread wings, flying in close formation, wave after V-shaped wave. He stood and stared at them, amazed; he had never imagined that such aircraft existed in the First Century. Then a high-pitched screaming sound cut through the roar of the propellers, and for an instant he saw countless small specks in the sky, falling downward.

The first bomb-salvo landed in the young pines, where he had fought against the first air attack. Great gouts of flame shot upward, and smoke, and flying earth and debris. Hradzka turned and started to run. Another salvo fell in front of him; he veered to the left and plunged on through the undergrowth. Now the bombs were falling all about him, deafening him with their thunder, shaking him with concussion. He dodged, frightened, as the trunk of a tree came crashing down beside him. Then something hit him across the back, knocking him flat. For a moment, he lay stunned, then tried to rise. As he did, a searing light filled his eyes and a wave of intolerable heat swept over him. Then darkness....

"No, Zarvas Pol," Kradzy Zago repeated. "Hradzka will not return; the 'time-machine' was sabotaged."

"So? By you?" the soldier asked.

The scientist nodded. "I knew the purpose for which he intended it. Hradzka was not content with having enslaved a whole Solar System: he hungered to bring tyranny and serfdom to all the past and all the future as well; he wanted to be master not only of the present but of the centuries that were and were to be, as well. I never took part in politics, Zarvas Pol; I had no hand in this revolt. But I could not be party to such a crime as Hradzka contemplated when it lay within my power to prevent it."

"The machine will take him out of our space-time continuum, or back to a time when this planet was a swirling cloud of flaming gas?" Zarvas Pol asked.

Kradzy Zago shook his head. "No, the unit is not powerful enough for that. It

will only take him about ten thousand years into the past. But then, when it stops, the machine will destroy itself. It may destroy Hradzka with it or he may escape. But if he does, he will be left stranded ten thousand years ago, when he can do us no harm.

"Actually, it did not operate as he imagined and there is an infinitely small chance that he could have returned to our 'time', in any event. But I wanted to insure against even so small a chance."

"We can't be sure of that," Zarvas Pol objected. "He may know more about the machine than you think; enough more to build another like it. So you must build me a machine and I'll take back a party of volunteers and hunt him down."

"That would not be necessary, and you would only share his fate." Then, apparently changing the subject, Kradzy Zago asked: "Tell me, Zarvas Pol; have you never heard the legends of the Deadly Radiations?"

General Zarvas smiled. "Who has not? Every cadet at the Officers' College dreams of re-discovering them, to use as a weapon, but nobody ever has. We hear these tales of how, in the early days, atomic engines and piles and fission-bombs emitted particles which were utterly deadly, which would make anything with which they came in contact deadly, which would bring a horrible death to any human being. But these are only myths. All the ancient experiments have been duplicated time and again, and the deadly radiation effect has never been observed. Some say that it is a mere old-wives' terror tale; some say that the deaths were caused by fear of atomic energy, when it was still unfamiliar; others contend that the fundamental nature of atomic energy has altered by the degeneration of the fissionable matter. For my own part, I'm not enough of a scientist to have an opinion."

The old one smiled wanly. "None of these theories are correct. In the beginning of the Atomic Era, the Deadly Radiations existed. They still exist, but they are no longer deadly, because all life on this planet has adapted itself to such radiations, and all living things are now immune to them."

"And Hradzka has returned to a time when such immunity did not exist? But would that not be to his advantage?"

"Remember, General, that man has been using atomic energy for ten thousand years. Our whole world has become drenched with radioactivity. The planet, the seas, the atmosphere, and every living thing, are all radioactive, now. Radioactivity is as natural to us as the air we breathe. Now, you remember hearing of the great wars of the first centuries of the Atomic Era, in which whole nations were wiped out, leaving only hundreds of survivors out of millions. You, no doubt, think that such tales are products of ignorant and barbaric imagination, but I assure you, they are literally true. It was not the blast-effect of a few bombs which created such holocausts, but the radiations released by the bombs. And those who

survived to carry on the race were men and women whose systems resisted the radiations, and they transmitted to their progeny that power of resistance. In many cases, their children were mutants—not monsters, although there were many of them, too, which did not survive—but humans who were immune to radioactivity.''

''An interesting theory, Kradzy Zago,'' the soldier commented. ''And one which conforms both to what we know of atomic energy and to the ancient legends. Then you would say that those radiations are still deadly—to the non-immune?''

''Exactly. And Hradzka, his body emitting those radiations, has returned to the First Century of the Atomic Era—to a world without immunity.''

General Zarvas' smile vanished. ''Man!'' he cried in horror. ''You have loosed a carrier of death among those innocent people of the past!''

Kradzy Zago nodded. ''That is true. I estimate that Hradzka will probably cause the death of a hundred or so people, before he is dealt with. But dealt with he will be. Tell me, General; if a man should appear now, out of nowhere, spreading a strange and horrible plague wherever he went, what would you do?''

''Why, I'd hunt him down and kill him,'' General Zarvas replied. ''Not for anything he did, but for the menace he was. And then, I'd cover his body with a mass of concrete bigger than this palace.''

''Precisely.'' Kradzy Zago smiled. ''And the military commanders and political leaders of the First Century were no less ruthless or efficient than you. You know how atomic energy was first used? There was an ancient nation, upon the ruins of whose cities we have built our own, which was famed for its idealistic humanitarianism. Yet that nation, treacherously attacked, created the first atomic bombs in self defense, and used them. It is among the people of that nation that Hradzka has emerged.''

''But would they recognize him as the cause of the calamity he brings among them?''

''Of course. He will emerge at the time when atomic energy is first being used. They will have detectors for the Deadly Radiations—detectors we know nothing of, today, for a detection instrument must be free from the thing it is intended to detect, and today everything is radioactive. It will be a day or so before they discover what is happening to them, and not a few will die in that time, I fear; but once they have found out what is killing their people, Hradzka's days—no, his hours—will be numbered.''

''A mass of concrete bigger than this place,'' Tobbh the Slave repeated General Zarvas' words. ''''

Prince Burvanny clapped him on the shoulder. ''Tobbh, man! You've hit it!''

''You mean...?'' Kradzy Zago began.

"Yes. You all know of it. It's stood for nobody knows how many millennia, and nobody's ever decided what it was, to begin with, except that somebody, once, filled a valley with concrete, level from mountain-top to mountain-top. The accepted theory is that it was done for a firing-stand for the first Moon-rocket. But gentlemen, our friend Tobbh's explained it. It is the tomb of Hradzka, and it has been the tomb of Hradzka for ten thousand years before Hradzka was born!"

GENESIS

Was this ill-fated expedition the end of a proud, old race—or the beginning of a new one?

There are strange gaps in our records of the past. We find traces of man-like things—but, suddenly, man appears, far too much developed to be the "next step" in a well-linked chain of evolutionary evidence. Perhaps something like the events of this story furnishes the answer to the riddle.

Aboard the ship, there was neither day nor night; the hours slipped gently by, as vistas of star-gemmed blackness slid across the visiscreens. For the crew, time had some meaning—one watch on duty and two off. But for the thousand-odd colonists, the men and women who were to be the spearhead of migration to a new and friendlier planet, it had none. They slept, and played, worked at such tasks as they could invent, and slept again, while the huge ship followed her plotted trajectory.

Kalvar Dard, the army officer who would lead them in their new home, had as little to do as any of his followers. The ship's officers had all the responsibility for the voyage, and, for the first time in over five years, he had none at all. He was finding the unaccustomed idleness more wearying than the hectic work of loading the ship before the blastoff from Doorsha. He went over his landing and security plans again, and found no probable emergency unprepared for. Dard wandered about the ship, talking to groups of his colonists, and found morale even better than he had hoped. He spent hours staring into the forward visiscreens, watching the disc of Tareesh, the planet of his destination, grow larger and plainer ahead.

Now, with the voyage almost over, he was in the cargo-hold just aft of the Number Seven bulkhead, with six girls to help him, checking construction material which would be needed immediately after landing. The stuff had all been checked two or three times before, but there was no harm in going over it again. It furnished an occupation to fill in the time; it gave Kalvar Dard an excuse for surrounding himself with half a dozen charming girls, and the girls seemed to enjoy being with him. There was tall blonde Olva, the electromagnetician; pert little Varnis, the machinist's helper; Kyna, the surgeon's-aide; dark-haired Analea; Dorita, the accountant; plump little Eldra, the armament technician. At the moment, they were all sitting on or around the desk in the corner of the store-room, going over the inventory when they were not just gabbling.

"Well, how about the rock-drill bitts?" Dorita was asking earnestly, trying to stick to business. "Won't we need them almost as soon as we're off?"

"Yes, we'll have to dig temporary magazines for our explosives, small-arms and artillery ammunition, and storage-pits for our fissionables and radioactives," Kalvar Dard replied. "We'll have to have safe places for that stuff ready before it can be unloaded; and if we run into hard rock near the surface, we'll have to drill holes for blasting-shots."

"The drilling machinery goes into one of those prefabricated sheds," Eldra considered. "Will there be room in it for all the bitts, too?"

Kalvar Dard shrugged. "Maybe. If not, we'll cut poles and build racks for them outside. The bitts are nono-steel; they can be stored in the open."

"If there are poles to cut," Olva added.

"I'm not worrying about that," Kalvar Dard replied. "We have a pretty fair idea of conditions on Tareesh; our astronomers have been making telescopic observations for the past fifteen centuries. There's a pretty big Arctic ice-cap, but it's been receding slowly, with a wide belt of what's believed to be open grassland to the south of it, and a belt of what's assumed to be evergreen forest south of that. We plan to land somewhere in the northern hemisphere, about the grassland-forest line. And since Tareesh is richer in water that Doorsha, you mustn't think of grassland in terms of our wire-grass plains, or forests in terms of our brush thickets. The vegetation should be much more luxuriant."

"If there's such a large polar ice-cap, the summers ought to be fairly cool, and the winters cold," Varnis reasoned. "I'd think that would mean fur-bearing animals. Colonel, you'll have to shoot me something with a nice soft fur; I like furs."

Kalvar Dard chuckled. "Shoot you nothing, you can shoot your own furs. I've seen your carbine and pistol scores," he began.

There was a sudden suck of air, disturbing the papers on the desk. They all turned to see one of the ship's rocket-boat bays open; a young Air Force lieutenant named Seldar Glav, who would be staying on Tareesh with them to pilot their aircraft, emerged from an open airlock.

"Don't tell me you've been to Tareesh and back in that thing," Olva greeted him.

Seldar Glav grinned at her. "I could have been, at that; we're only twenty or thirty planetary calibers away, now. We ought to be entering Tareeshan atmosphere by the middle of the next watch. I was only checking the boats, to make sure they'll be ready to launch.... Colonel Kalvar, would you mind stepping over here? There's something I think you should look at, sir."

Kalvar Dard took one arm from around Analea's waist and lifted the other from Varnis' shoulder, sliding off the desk. He followed Glav into the boat-bay; as

they went through the airlock, the cheerfulness left the young lieutenant's face.

"I didn't want to say anything in front of the girls, sir," he began, "but I've been checking boats to make sure we can make a quick getaway. Our meteor-security's gone out. The detectors are deader then the Fourth Dynasty, and the blasters won't synchronize.... Did you hear a big thump, about a half an hour ago, Colonel?"

"Yes, I thought the ship's labor-crew was shifting heavy equipment in the hold aft of us. What was it, a meteor-hit?"

"It was. Just aft of Number Ten bulkhead. A meteor about the size of the nose of that rocket-boat."

Kalvar Dard whistled softly. "Great Gods of Power! The detectors must be dead, to pass up anything like that.... Why wasn't a boat-stations call sent out?"

"Captain Vlazil was unwilling to risk starting a panic, sir," the Air Force officer replied. "Really, I'm exceeding my orders in mentioning it to you, but I thought you should know...."

Kalvar Dard swore. "It's a blasted pity Captain Vlazil didn't try thinking! Gold-braided quarter-wit! Maybe his crew might panic, but my people wouldn't.... I'm going to call the control-room and have it out with him. By the Ten Gods...!"

He ran through the airlock and back into the hold, starting toward the intercom-phone beside the desk. Before he could reach it, there was another heavy jar, rocking the entire ship. He, and Seldar Glav, who had followed him out of the boat-bay, and the six girls, who had risen on hearing their commander's angry voice, were all tumbled into a heap. Dard surged to his feet, dragging Kyna up along with him; together, they helped the others to rise. The ship was suddenly filled with jangling bells, and the red danger-lights on the ceiling were flashing on and off.

"Attention! Attention!" the voice of some officer in the control-room blared out of the intercom-speaker. "The ship has just been hit by a large meteor! All compartments between bulkheads Twelve and Thirteen are sealed off. All persons between bulkheads Twelve and Thirteen, put on oxygen helmets and plug in at the nearest phone connection. Your air is leaking, and you can't get out, but if you put on oxygen equipment immediately, you'll be all right. We'll get you out as soon as we can, and in any case, we are only a few hours out of Tareeshan atmosphere. All persons in Compartment Twelve, put on...."

Kalvar Dard was swearing evilly. "That does it! That does it for good!... Anybody else in this compartment, below the living quarter level?"

"No, we're the only ones," Analea told him.

"The people above have their own boats; they can look after themselves. You girls, get in that boat, in there. Glav, you and I'll try to warn the people above...."

There was another jar, heavier than the one which had preceded it, throwing them all down again. As they rose, a new voice was shouting over the public-address system:

" The converters are backfiring, and rocket-fuel is leaking back toward the engine-rooms! An explosion is imminent! Abandon ship, all hands!"

Kalvar Dard and Seldar Glav grabbed the girls and literally threw them through the hatch, into the rocket-boat. Dard pushed Glav in ahead of him, then jumped in. Before he had picked himself up, two or three of the girls were at the hatch, dogging the cover down.

"All right, Glav, blast off!" Dard ordered. "We've got to be at least a hundred miles from this ship when she blows, or we'll blow with her!"

"Don't I know!" Seldar Glav retorted over his shoulder, racing for the controls. "Grab hold of something, everybody; I'm going to fire all jets at once!"

An instant later, while Kalvar Dard and the girls clung to stanchions and pieces of fixed furniture, the boat shot forward out of its housing. When Dard's head had cleared, it was in free flight.

"How was that?" Glav yelled. "Everybody all right?" He hesitated for a moment. "I think I blacked out for about ten seconds."

Kalvar Dard looked the girls over. Eldra was using a corner of her smock to stanch a nosebleed, and Olva had a bruise over one eye. Otherwise, everybody was in good shape.

"Wonder we didn't all black out, permanently," he said. "Well, put on the visiscreens, and let's see what's going on outside. Olva, get on the radio and try to see if anybody else got away."

"Set course for Tareesh?" Glav asked. "We haven't fuel enough to make it back to Doorsha."

"I was afraid of that," Dard nodded. "Tareesh it is; northern hemisphere, daylight side. Try to get about the edge of the temperate zone, as near water as you can...."

They were flung off their feet again, this time backward along the boat. As they picked themselves up, Seldar Glav was shaking his head, sadly. "That was the ship going up," he said; "the blast must have caught us dead astern."

"All right." Kalvar Dard rubbed a bruised forehead. "Set course for Tareesh, then cut out the jets till we're ready to land. And get the screens on, somebody; I want to see what's happened."

The screens glowed; then full vision came on. The planet on which they would land loomed huge before them, its north pole toward them, and its single satellite on the port side. There was no sign of any rocket-boat in either side screen, and the rear-view screen was a blur of yellow flame from the jets.

"Cut the jets, Glav," Dard repeated. "Didn't you hear me?"

"But I did, sir!" Seldar Glav indicated the firing-panel. Then he glanced at the rear-view screen. "The gods help us! It's yellow flame; the jets are burning out!"

Kalvar Dard had not boasted idly when he had said that his people would not panic. All the girls went white, and one or two gave low cries of consternation, but that was all.

"What happens next?" Analea wanted to know. "Do we blow, too?"

"Yes, as soon as the fuel-line burns up to the tanks."

"Can you land on Tareesh before then?" Dard asked.

"I can try. How about the satellite? It's closer."

"It's also airless. Look at it and see for yourself," Kalvar Dard advised. "Not enough mass to hold an atmosphere."

Glav looked at the army officer with new respect. He had always been inclined to think of the Frontier Guards as a gang of scientifically illiterate dirk-and-pistol bravos. He fiddled for a while with instruments on the panel; an automatic computer figured the distance to the planet, the boat's velocity, and the time needed for a landing.

"We have a chance, sir," he said. "I think I can set down in about thirty minutes; that should give us about ten minutes to get clear of the boat, before she blows up."

"All right; get busy, girls," Kalvar Dard said. "Grab everything we'll need. Arms and ammunition first; all of them you can find. After that, warm clothing, bedding, tools and food."

With that, he jerked open one of the lockers and began pulling out weapons. He buckled on a pistol and dagger, and handed other weapon-belts to the girls behind him. He found two of the heavy big-game rifles, and several bandoliers of ammunition for them. He tossed out carbines, and boxes of carbine and pistol cartridges. He found two bomb-bags, each containing six light anti-personnel grenades and a big demolition-bomb. Glancing, now and then, at the forward screen, he caught glimpses of blue sky and green-tinted plains below.

"All right!" the pilot yelled. "We're coming in for a landing! A couple of you stand by to get the hatch open."

There was a jolt, and all sense of movement stopped. A cloud of white smoke drifted past the screens. The girls got the hatch open; snatching up weapons and bedding-wrapped bundles they all scrambled up out of the boat.

There was fire outside. The boat had come down upon a grassy plain; now the grass was burning from the heat of the jets. One by one, they ran forward along the top of the rocket-boat, jumping down to the ground clear of the blaze.

Then, with every atom of strength they possessed they ran away from the doomed boat.

The ground was rough, and the grass high, impeding them. One of the girls tripped and fell; without pausing, two others pulled her to her feet, while another snatched up and slung the carbine she had dropped. Then, ahead, Kalvar Dard saw a deep gully, through which a little stream trickled.

They huddled together at the bottom of it, waiting, for what seemed like a long while. Then a gentle tremor ran through the ground, and swelled to a sickening, heaving shock. A roar of almost palpable sound swept over them, and a flash of blue-white light dimmed the sun above. The sound, the shock, and the searing light did not pass away at once; they continued for seconds that seemed like an eternity. Earth and stones pelted down around them; choking dust rose. Then the thunder and the earth-shock were over; above, incandescent vapors swirled, and darkened into an overhanging pall of smoke and dust.

For a while, they crouched motionless, too stunned to speak. Then shaken nerves steadied and jarred brains cleared. They all rose weakly. Trickles of earth were still coming down from the sides of the gully, and the little stream, which had been clear and sparkling, was roiled with mud. Mechanically, Kalvar Dard brushed the dust from his clothes and looked to his weapons.

"That was just the fuel-tank of a little Class-3 rocket-boat," he said. "I wonder what the explosion of the ship was like." He thought for a moment before continuing. "Glav, I think I know why our jets burned out. We were stern-on to the ship when she blew; the blast drove our flame right back through the jets."

"Do you think the explosion was observed from Doorsha?" Dorita inquired, more concerned about the practical aspects of the situation. "The ship, I mean. After all, we have no means of communication, of our own."

"Oh, I shouldn't doubt it; there were observatories all around the planet watching our ship," Kalvar Dard said. "They probably know all about it, by now. But if any of you are thinking about the chances of rescue, forget it. We're stuck here."

"That's right. There isn't another human being within fifty million miles," Seldar Glav said. "And that was the first and only space-ship ever built. It took fifty years to build her, and even allowing twenty for research that wouldn't have to be duplicated, you can figure when we can expect another one."

"The answer to that one is, never. The ship blew up in space; fifty years' effort and fifteen hundred people gone, like that." Kalvar Dard snapped his fingers. "So now, they'll try to keep Doorsha habitable for a few more thousand years by irrigation, and forget about immigrating to Tareesh."

"Well, maybe, in a hundred thousand years, our descendants will build a ship and go to Doorsha, then," Olva considered.

"Our descendants?" Eldra looked at her in surprize. "You mean, then...?"

Kyna chuckled. "Eldra, you are an awful innocent, about anything that doesn't have a breech-action or a recoil-mechanism," she said. "Why do you think the women on this expedition outnumbered the men seven to five, and why do you think there were so many obstetricians and pediatricians in the med. staff? We were sent out to put a human population on Tareesh, weren't we? Well, here we are."

"But.... Aren't we ever going to...?" Varnis began. "Won't we ever see anybody else, or do anything but just live here, like animals, without machines or ground-cars or aircraft or houses or anything?" Then she began to sob bitterly.

Analea, who had been cleaning a carbine that had gotten covered with loose earth during the explosion, laid it down and went to Varnis, putting her arm around the other girl and comforting her. Kalvar Dard picked up the carbine she had laid down.

"Now, let's see," he began. "We have two heavy rifles, six carbines, and eight pistols, and these two bags of bombs. How much ammunition, counting what's in our belts, do we have?"

They took stock of their slender resources, even Varnis joining in the task, as he had hoped she would. There were over two thousand rounds for the pistols, better than fifteen hundred for the carbines, and four hundred for the two big-game guns. They had some spare clothing, mostly space-suit undergarments, enough bed-robes, one hand-axe, two flashlights, a first-aid kit, and three atomic lighters. Each one had a combat-dagger. There was enough tinned food for about a week.

"We'll have to begin looking for game and edible plants, right away," Glav considered. "I suppose there is game, of some sort; but our ammunition won't last forever."

"We'll have to make it last as long as we can; and we'll have to begin improvising weapons," Dard told him. "Throwing-spears, and throwing-axes. If we can find metal, or any recognizable ore that we can smelt, we'll use that; if not, we'll use chipped stone. Also, we can learn to make snares and traps, after we learn the habits of the animals on this planet. By the time the ammunition's gone, we ought to have learned to do without firearms."

"Think we ought to camp here?"

Kalvar Dard shook his head. "No wood here for fuel, and the blast will have scared away all the game. We'd better go upstream; if we go down, we'll find the water roiled with mud and unfit to drink. And if the game on this planet behave like the game-herds on the wastelands of Doorsha, they'll run for high ground when frightened."

Varnis rose from where she had been sitting. Having mastered her emo-

tions, she was making a deliberate effort to show it.

"Let's make up packs out of this stuff," she suggested. "We can use the bedding and spare clothing to bundle up the food and ammunition."

They made up packs and slung them, then climbed out of the gully. Off to the left, the grass was burning in a wide circle around the crater left by the explosion of the rocket-boat. Kalvar Dard, carrying one of the heavy rifles, took the lead. Beside and a little behind him, Analea walked, her carbine ready. Glav, with the other heavy rifle, brought up in the rear, with Olva covering for him, and between, the other girls walked, two and two.

Ahead, on the far horizon, was a distance-blue line of mountains. The little company turned their faces toward them and moved slowly away, across the empty sea of grass.

They had been walking, now, for five years. Kalvar Dard still led, the heavy rifle cradled in the crook of his left arm and a sack of bombs slung from his shoulder, his eyes forever shifting to right and left searching for hidden danger. The clothes in which he had jumped from the rocket-boat were patched and ragged; his shoes had been replaced by high laced buskins of smoke-tanned hide. He was bearded, now, and his hair had been roughly trimmed with the edge of his dagger.

Analea still walked beside him, but her carbine was slung, and she carried three spears with chipped flint heads; one heavy weapon, to be thrown by hand or used for stabbing, and two light javelins to be thrown with the aid of the hooked throwing-stick Glav had invented. Beside her trudged a four-year old boy, hers and Dard's, and on her back, in a fur-lined net bag, she carried their six-month-old baby.

In the rear, Glav still kept his place with the other big-game gun, and Olva walked beside him with carbine and spears; in front of them, their three-year-old daughter toddled. Between vanguard and rearguard, the rest of the party walked: Varnis, carrying her baby on her back, and Dorita, carrying a baby and leading two other children. The baby on her back had cost the life of Kyna in childbirth; one of the others had been left motherless when Eldra had been killed by the Hairy People.

That had been two years ago, in the winter when they had used one of their two demolition-bombs to blast open a cavern in the mountains. It had been a hard winter; two children had died, then—Kyna's firstborn, and the little son of Kalvar Dard and Dorita. It had been their first encounter with the Hairy People, too.

Eldra had gone outside the cave with one of the skin water-bags, to fill it at the spring. It had been after sunset, but she had carried her pistol, and no one had thought of danger until they heard the two quick shots, and the scream. They had all rushed out, to find four shaggy, manlike things tearing at Eldra with hands and

teeth, another lying dead, and a sixth huddled at one side, clutching its abdomen and whimpering. There had been a quick flurry of shots that had felled all four of the assailants, and Seldar Glav had finished the wounded creature with his dagger, but Eldra was dead. They had built a cairn of stones over her body, as they had done over the bodies of the two children killed by the cold. But, after an examination to see what sort of things they were, they had tumbled the bodies of the Hairy People over the cliff. These had been too bestial to bury as befitted human dead, but too manlike to skin and eat as game.

Since then, they had often found traces of the Hairy People, and when they met with them, they killed them without mercy. These were great shambling parodies of humanity, long-armed, short-legged, twice as heavy as men, with close-set reddish eyes and heavy bone-crushing jaws. They may have been incredibly debased humans, or perhaps beasts on the very threshold of manhood. From what he had seen of conditions on this planet, Kalvar Dard suspected the latter to be the case. In a million or so years, they might evolve into something like humanity. Already, the Hairy ones had learned the use of fire, and of chipped crude stone implements—mostly heavy triangular choppers to be used in the hand, without helves.

Twice, after that night, the Hairy People had attacked them—once while they were on the march, and once in camp. Both assaults had been beaten off without loss to themselves, but at cost of precious ammunition. Once they had caught a band of ten of them swimming a river on logs; they had picked them all off from the bank with their carbines. Once, when Kalvar Dard and Analea had been scouting alone, they had come upon a dozen of them huddled around a fire and had wiped them out with a single grenade. Once, a large band of Hairy People hunted them for two days, but only twice had they come close, and both times, a single shot had sent them all scampering. That had been after the bombing of the group around the fire. Dard was convinced that the beings possessed the rudiments of a language, enough to communicate a few simple ideas, such as the fact that this little tribe of aliens were dangerous in the extreme.

There were Hairy People about now; for the past five days, moving northward through the forest to the open grasslands, the people of Kalvar Dard had found traces of them. Now, as they came out among the seedling growth at the edge of the open plains, everybody was on the alert.

They emerged from the big trees and stopped among the young growth, looking out into the open country. About a mile away, a herd of game was grazing slowly westward. In the distance, they looked like the little horse-like things, no higher than a man's waist and heavily maned and bearded, that had been one of their most important sources of meat. For the ten thousandth time, Dard wished, as he strained his eyes, that somebody had thought to secure a pair of binoculars

when they had abandoned the rocket-boat. He studied the grazing herd for a long time.

The seedling pines extended almost to the game-herd and would offer concealment for the approach, but the animals were grazing into the wind, and their scent was much keener than their vision. This would prelude one of their favorite hunting techniques, that of lurking in the high grass ahead of the quarry. It had rained heavily in the past few days, and the undermat of dead grass was soaked, making a fire-hunt impossible. Kalvar Dard knew that he could stalk to within easy carbine-shot, but he was unwilling to use cartridges on game; and in view of the proximity of Hairy People, he did not want to divide his band for a drive hunt.

"What's the scheme?" Analea asked him, realizing the problem as well as he did. "Do we try to take them from behind?"

"We'll take them from an angle," he decided. "We'll start from here and work in, closing on them at the rear of the herd. Unless the wind shifts on us, we ought to get within spear-cast. You and I will use the spears; Varnis can come along and cover for us with a carbine. Glav, you and Olva and Dorita stay here with the children and the packs. Keep a sharp lookout; Hairy People around, somewhere." He unslung his rifle and exchanged it for Olva's spears. "We can only eat about two of them before the meat begins to spoil, but kill all you can," he told Analea; "we need the skins."

Then he and the two girls began their slow, cautious, stalk. As long as the grassland was dotted with young trees, they walked upright, making good time, but the last five hundred yards they had to crawl, stopping often to check the wind, while the horse-herd drifted slowly by. Then they were directly behind the herd, with the wind in their faces, and they advanced more rapidly.

"Close enough?" Dard whispered to Analea.

"Yes; I'm taking the one that's lagging a little behind."

"I'm taking the one on the left of it." Kalvar Dard fitted a javelin to the hook of his throwing-stick. "Ready? Now!"

He leaped to his feet, drawing back his right arm and hurling, the throwing-stick giving added velocity to the spear. Beside him, he was conscious of Analea rising and propelling her spear. His missile caught the little bearded pony in the chest; it stumbled and fell forward to its front knees. He snatched another light spear, set it on the hook of the stick and darted it at another horse, which reared, biting at the spear with its teeth. Grabbing the heavy stabbing-spear, he ran forward, finishing it off with a heart-thrust. As he did, Varnis slung her carbine, snatched a stone-headed throwing axe from her belt, and knocked down another horse, then ran forward with her dagger to finish it.

By this time, the herd, alarmed, had stampeded and was galloping away, leaving the dead and dying behind. He and Analea had each killed two; with the

one Varnis had knocked down, that made five. Using his dagger, he finished off one that was still kicking on the ground, and then began pulling out the throwing-spears. The girls, shouting in unison, were announcing the successful completion of the hunt; Glav, Olva, and Dorita were coming forward with the children.

It was sunset by the time they had finished the work of skinning and cutting up the horses and had carried the hide-wrapped bundles of meat to the little brook where they had intended camping. There was firewood to be gathered, and the meal to be cooked, and they were all tired.

"We can't do this very often, any more," Kalvar Dard told them, "but we might as well, tonight. Don't bother rubbing sticks for fire; I'll use the lighter."

He got it from a pouch on his belt—a small, gold-plated, atomic lighter, bearing the crest of his old regiment of the Frontier Guards. It was the last one they had, in working order. Piling a handful of dry splinters under the firewood, he held the lighter to it, pressed the activator, and watched the fire eat into the wood.

The greatest achievement of man's civilization, the mastery of the basic, cosmic, power of the atom—being used to kindle a fire of natural fuel, to cook unseasoned meat killed with stone-tipped spears. Dard looked sadly at the twinkling little gadget, then slipped it back into its pouch. Soon it would be worn out, like the other two, and then they would gain fire only by rubbing dry sticks, or hacking sparks from bits of flint or pyrites. Soon, too, the last cartridge would be fired, and then they would perforce depend for protection, as they were already doing for food, upon their spears.

And they were so helpless. Six adults, burdened with seven little children, all of them requiring momently care and watchfulness. If the cartridges could be made to last until they were old enough to fend for themselves.... If they could avoid collisions with the Hairy People.... Some day, they would be numerous enough for effective mutual protection and support; some day, the ratio of helpless children to able adults would redress itself. Until then, all that they could do would be to survive; day after day, they must follow the game-herds.

For twenty years, now, they had been following the game. Winters had come, with driving snow, forcing horses and deer into the woods, and the little band of humans to the protection of mountain caves. Springtime followed, with fresh grass on the plains and plenty of meat for the people of Kalvar Dard. Autumns followed summers, with fire-hunts, and the smoking and curing of meat and hides. Winters followed autumns, and springtimes came again, and thus until the twentieth year after the landing of the rocket-boat.

Kalvar Dard still walked in the lead, his hair and beard flecked with gray, but he no longer carried the heavy rifle; the last cartridge for that had been fired long ago. He carried the hand-axe, fitted with a long helve, and a spear with a

steel head that had been worked painfully from the receiver of a useless carbine. He still had his pistol, with eight cartridges in the magazine, and his dagger, and the bomb-bag, containing the big demolition-bomb and one grenade. The last shred of clothing from the ship was gone, now; he was clad in a sleeveless tunic of skin and horsehide buskins.

Analea no longer walked beside him; eight years before, she had broken her back in a fall. It had been impossible to move her, and she stabbed herself with her dagger to save a cartridge. Seldar Glav had broken through the ice while crossing a river, and had lost his rifle; the next day he died of the chill he had taken. Olva had been killed by the Hairy People, the night they had attacked the camp, when Varnis' child had been killed.

They had beaten off that attack, shot or speared ten of the huge sub-men, and the next morning they buried their dead after their custom, under cairns of stone. Varnis had watched the burial of her child with blank, uncomprehending eyes, then she had turned to Kalvar Dard and said something that had horrified him more than any wild outburst of grief could have.

"Come on, Dard; what are we doing this for? You promised you'd take us to Tareesh, where we'd have good houses, and machines, and all sorts of lovely things to eat and wear. I don't like this place, Dard; I want to go to Tareesh."

From that day on, she had wandered in merciful darkness. She had not been idiotic, or raving mad; she had just escaped from a reality that she could no longer bear.

Varnis, lost in her dream-world, and Dorita, hard-faced and haggard, were the only ones left, beside Kalvar Dard, of the original eight. But the band had grown, meanwhile, to more than fifteen. In the rear, in Seldar Glav's old place, the son of Kalvar Dard and Analea walked. Like his father, he wore a pistol, for which he had six rounds, and a dagger, and in his hand he carried a stone-headed killing-maul with a three-foot handle which he had made for himself. The woman who walked beside him and carried his spears was the daughter of Glav and Olva; in a net-bag on her back she carried their infant child. The first Tareeshan born of Tareeshan parents; Kalvar Dard often looked at his little grandchild during nights in camp and days on the trail, seeing, in that tiny fur-swaddled morsel of humanity, the meaning and purpose of all that he did. Of the older girls, one or two were already pregnant, now; this tiny threatened beachhead of humanity was expanding, gaining strength. Long after man had died out on Doorsha and the dying planet itself had become an arid waste, the progeny of this little band would continue to grow and to dominate the younger planet, nearer the sun. Some day, an even mightier civilization than the one he had left would rise here....

All day the trail had wound upward into the mountains. Great cliffs loomed above them, and little streams spumed and dashed in rocky gorges below. All

day, the Hairy People had followed, fearful to approach too close, unwilling to allow their enemies to escape. It had started when they had rushed the camp, at daybreak; they had been beaten off, at cost of almost all the ammunition, and the death of one child. No sooner had the tribe of Kalvar Dard taken the trail, however, than they had been pressing after them. Dard had determined to cross the mountains, and had led his people up a game-trail, leading toward the notch of a pass high against the skyline.

The shaggy ape-things seemed to have divined his purpose. Once or twice, he had seen hairy brown shapes dodging among the rocks and stunted trees to the left. They were trying to reach the pass ahead of him. Well, if they did.... He made a quick mental survey of his resources. His pistol, and his son's, and Dorita's, with eight, and six, and seven rounds. One grenade, and the big demolition bomb, too powerful to be thrown by hand, but which could be set for delayed explosion and dropped over a cliff or left behind to explode among pursuers. Five steel daggers, and plenty of spears and slings and axes. Himself, his son and his son's woman, Dorita, and four or five of the older boys and girls, who would make effective front-line fighters. And Varnis, who might come out of her private dream-world long enough to give account for herself, and even the tiniest of the walking children could throw stones or light spears. Yes, they could force the pass, if the Hairy People reached it ahead of them, and then seal it shut with the heavy bomb. What lay on the other side, he did not know; he wondered how much game there would be, and if there were Hairy People on that side, too.

Two shots slammed quickly behind him. He dropped his axe and took a two-hand grip on his stabbing-spear as he turned. His son was hurrying forward, his pistol drawn, glancing behind as he came.

"Hairy People. Four," he reported. "I shot two; she threw a spear and killed another. The other ran."

The daughter of Seldar Glav and Olva nodded in agreement.

"I had no time to throw again," she said, "and Bo-Bo would not shoot the one that ran."

Kalvar Dard's son, who had no other name than the one his mother had called him as a child, defended himself. "He was running away. It is the rule: ."

Kalvar Dard nodded. "You did right, son," he said, taking out his own pistol and removing the magazine, from which he extracted two cartridges. "Load these into your pistol; four rounds aren't enough. Now we each have six. Go back to the rear, keep the little ones moving, and don't let Varnis get behind."

"That is right. ," the boy recited obediently. "That is the rule."

He dropped to the rear. Kalvar Dard holstered his pistol and picked up his axe, and the column moved forward again. They were following a ledge, now; on the left, there was a sheer drop of several hundred feet, and on the right a cliff

rose above them, growing higher and steeper as the trail slanted upward. Dard was worried about the ledge; if it came to an end, they would all be trapped. No one would escape. He suddenly felt old and unutterably weary. It was a frightful weight that he bore—responsibility for an entire race.

Suddenly, behind him, Dorita fired her pistol upward. Dard sprang forward—there was no room for him to jump aside—and drew his pistol. The boy, Bo-Bo, was trying to find a target from his position in the rear. Then Dard saw the two Hairy People; the boy fired, and the stone fell, all at once.

It was a heavy stone, half as big as a man's torso, and it almost missed Kalvar Dard. If it had hit him directly, it would have killed him instantly, mashing him to a bloody pulp; as it was, he was knocked flat, the stone pinning his legs.

At Bo-Bo's shot, a hairy body plummeted down, to hit the ledge. Bo-Bo's woman instantly ran it through with one of her spears. The other ape-thing, the one Dorita had shot, was still clinging to a rock above. Two of the children scampered up to it and speared it repeatedly, screaming like little furies. Dorita and one of the older girls got the rock off Kalvar Dard's legs and tried to help him to his feet, but he collapsed, unable to stand. Both his legs were broken.

This was it, he thought, sinking back. "Dorita, I want you to run ahead and see what the trail's like," he said. "See if the ledge is passable. And find a place, not too far ahead, where we can block the trail by exploding that demolition-bomb. It has to be close enough for a couple of you to carry or drag me and get me there in one piece."

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?" he retorted. "I have both legs broken. You can't carry me with you; if you try it, they'll catch us and kill us all. I'll have to stay behind; I'll block the trail behind you, and get as many of them as I can, while I'm at it. Now, run along and do as I said."

She nodded. "I'll be back as soon as I can," she agreed.

The others were crowding around Dard. Bo-Bo bent over him, perplexed and worried. "What are you going to do, father?" he asked. "You are hurt. Are you going to go away and leave us, as mother did when she was hurt?"

"Yes, son; I'll have to. You carry me on ahead a little, when Dorita gets back, and leave me where she shows you to. I'm going to stay behind and block the trail, and kill a few Hairy People. I'll use the big bomb."

"The bomb? The one nobody dares throw?" The boy looked at his father in wonder.

"That's right. Now, when you leave me, take the others and get away as fast as you can. Don't stop till you're up to the pass. Take my pistol and dagger, and the axe and the big spear, and take the little bomb, too. Take everything I have, only leave the big bomb with me. I'll need that."

Dorita rejoined them. "There's a waterfall ahead. We can get around it, and up to the pass. The way's clear and easy; if you put off the bomb just this side of it, you'll start a rock-slide that'll block everything."

"All right. Pick me up, a couple of you. Don't take hold of me below the knees. And hurry."

A hairy shape appeared on the ledge below them; one of the older boys used his throwing-stick to drive a javelin into it. Two of the girls picked up Dard; Bo-Bo and his woman gathered up the big spear and the axe and the bomb-bag.

They hurried forward, picking their way along the top of a talus of rubble at the foot of the cliff, and came to where the stream gushed out of a narrow gorge. The air was wet with spray there, and loud with the roar of the waterfall. Kalvar Dard looked around; Dorita had chosen the spot well. Not even a sure-footed mountain-goat could make the ascent, once that gorge was blocked.

"All right; put me down here," he directed. "Bo-Bo, take my belt, and give me the big bomb. You have one light grenade; know how to use it?"

"Of course, you have often showed me. I turn the top, and then press in the little thing on the side, and hold it in till I throw. I throw it at least a spear-cast, and drop to the ground or behind something."

"That's right. And use it only in greatest danger, to save everybody. Spare your cartridges; use them only to save life. And save everything of metal, no matter how small."

"Yes. Those are the rules. I will follow them, and so will the others. And we will always take care of Varnis."

"Well, goodbye, son." He gripped the boy's hand. "Now get everybody out of here; don't stop till you're at the pass."

"You're not staying behind!" Varnis cried. "Dard, you promised us! I remember, when we were all in the ship together—you and I and Analea and Olva and Dorita and Eldra and, oh, what was that other girl's name, Kyna! And we were all having such a nice time, and you were telling us how we'd all come to Tareesh, and we were having such fun talking about it...."

"That's right, Varnis," he agreed. "And so I will. I have something to do, here, but I'll meet you on top of the mountain, after I'm through, and in the morning we'll all go to Tareesh."

She smiled—the gentle, childlike smile of the harmlessly mad—and turned away. The son of Kalvar Dard made sure that she and all the children were on the way, and then he, too, turned and followed them, leaving Dard alone.

Alone, with a bomb and a task. He'd borne that task for twenty years, now; in a few minutes, it would be ended, with an instant's searing heat. He tried not to be too glad; there were so many things he might have done, if he had tried harder.

Metals, for instance. Somewhere there surely must be ores which they could have smelted, but he had never found them. And he might have tried catching some of the little horses they hunted for food, to break and train to bear burdens. And the alphabet—why hadn't he taught it to Bo-Bo and the daughter of Seldar Glav, and laid on them an obligation to teach the others? And the grass-seeds they used for making flour sometimes; they should have planted fields of the better kinds, and patches of edible roots, and returned at the proper time to harvest them. There were so many things, things that none of those young savages or their children would think of in ten thousand years....

Something was moving among the rocks, a hundred yards away. He straightened, as much as his broken legs would permit, and watched. Yes, there was one of them, and there was another, and another. One rose from behind a rock and came forward at a shambling run, making bestial sounds. Then two more lumbered into sight, and in a moment the ravine was alive with them. They were almost upon him when Kalvar Dard pressed in the thumbpiece of the bomb; they were clutching at him when he released it. He felt a slight jar....

When they reached the pass, they all stopped as the son of Kalvar Dard turned and looked back. Dorita stood beside him, looking toward the waterfall too; she also knew what was about to happen. The others merely gaped in blank incomprehension, or grasped their weapons, thinking that the enemy was pressing close behind and that they were making a stand here. A few of the smaller boys and girls began picking up stones.

Then a tiny pin-point of brilliance winked, just below where the snow-fed stream vanished into the gorge. That was all, for an instant, and then a great fire-shot cloud swirled upward, hundreds of feet into the air; there was a crash, louder than any sound any of them except Dorita and Varnis had ever heard before.

"He did it!" Dorita said softly.

"Yes, he did it. My father was a brave man," Bo-Bo replied. "We are safe, now."

Varnis, shocked by the explosion, turned and stared at him, and then she laughed happily. "Why, there you are, Dard!" she exclaimed. "I was wondering where you'd gone. What did you do, after we left?"

"What do you mean?" The boy was puzzled, not knowing how much he looked like his father, when his father had been an officer of the Frontier Guards, twenty years before.

His puzzlement worried Varnis vaguely. "You.... You are Dard, aren't you?" she asked. "But that's silly; of course you're Dard! Who else could you be?"

"Yes. I am Dard," the boy said, remembering that it was the rule for everybody to be kind to Varnis and to pretend to agree with her. Then another thought struck him. His shoulders straightened. "Yes. I am Dard, son of Dard," he told

them all. "I lead, now. Does anybody say no?"

He shifted his axe and spear to his left hand and laid his right hand on the butt of his pistol, looking sternly at Dorita. If any of them tried to dispute his claim, it would be she. But instead, she gave him the nearest thing to a real smile that had crossed her face in years.

"You are Dard," she told him; "you lead us, now."

"But of course Dard leads! Hasn't he always led us?" Varnis wanted to know. "Then what's all the argument about? And tomorrow he's going to take us to Tareesh, and we'll have houses and ground-cars and aircraft and gardens and lights, and all the lovely things we want. Aren't you, Dard?"

"Yes, Varnis; I will take you all to Tareesh, to all the wonderful things," Dard, son of Dard, promised, for such was the rule about Varnis.

Then he looked down from the pass into the country beyond. There were lower mountains, below, and foothills, and a wide blue valley, and, beyond that, distant peaks reared jaggedly against the sky. He pointed with his father's axe.

"We go down that way," he said.

So they went, down, and on, and on, and on. The last cartridge was fired; the last sliver of Doorshan metal wore out or rusted away. By then, however, they had learned to make chipped stone, and bone, and reindeer-horn, serve their needs. Century after century, millennium after millennium, they followed the game-herds from birth to death, and birth replenished their numbers faster than death depleted. Bands grew in numbers and split; young men rebelled against the rule of the old and took their women and children elsewhere.

They hunted down the hairy Neanderthalers, and exterminated them ruthlessly, the origin of their implacable hatred lost in legend. All that they remembered, in the misty, confused, way that one remembers a dream, was that there had once been a time of happiness and plenty, and that there was a goal to which they would some day attain. They left the mountains—were they the Caucasus? The Alps? The Pamirs?—and spread outward, conquering as they went.

We find their bones, and their stone weapons, and their crude paintings, in the caves of Cro-Magnon and Grimaldi and Altimira and Mas-d'Azil; the deep layers of horse and reindeer and mammoth bones at their feasting-place at Solutre. We wonder how and whence a race so like our own came into a world of brutish sub-humans.

Just as we wonder, too, at the network of canals which radiate from the polar caps of our sister planet, and speculate on the possibility that they were the work of hands like our own. And we concoct elaborate jokes about the "Men From Mars"—.

GRAVEYARD OF DREAMS

Despite Mr. Shakespeare, wealth and name are both dross compared with the theft of hope—and Maxwell had to rob a whole planet of it!

Standing at the armor-glass front of the observation deck and watching the mountains rise and grow on the horizon, Conn Maxwell gripped the metal handrail with painful intensity, as though trying to hold back the airship by force. Thirty minutes—twenty-six and a fraction of the Terran minutes he had become accustomed to—until he'd have to face it.

Then, realizing that he never, in his own thoughts, addressed himself as "sir," he turned.

"I beg your pardon?"

It was the first officer, wearing a Terran Federation Space Navy uniform of forty years, or about ten regulation-changes, ago. That was the sort of thing he had taken for granted before he had gone away. Now he was noticing it everywhere.

"Thirty minutes out of Litchfield, sir," the ship's officer repeated. "You'll go off by the midship gangway on the starboard side."

"Yes, I know. Thank you."

The first mate held out the clipboard he was carrying. "Would you mind checking over this, Mr. Maxwell? Your baggage list."

"Certainly." He glanced at the slip of paper. Valises, eighteen and twenty-five kilos, two; trunks, seventy-five and seventy kilos, two; microbook case, one-fifty kilos, one. The last item fanned up a little flicker of anger in him, not at any person, even himself, but at the situation in which he found himself and the futility of the whole thing.

"Yes, that's everything. I have no hand-luggage, just this stuff."

He noticed that this was the only baggage list under the clip; the other papers were all freight and express manifests. "Not many passengers left aboard, are there?"

"You're the only one in first-class, sir," the mate replied. "About forty farm-laborers on the lower deck. Everybody else got off at the other stops. Litchfield's the end of the run. You know anything about the place?"

"I was born there. I've been away at school for the last five years."

"On Baldur?"

"Terra. University of Montevideo." Once Conn would have said it almost boastfully.

The mate gave him a quick look of surprised respect, then grinned and nodded. "Of course; I should have known. You're Rodney Maxwell's son, aren't you? Your father's one of our regular freight shippers. Been sending out a lot of stuff lately." He looked as though he would have liked to continue the conversation, but said: "Sorry, I've got to go. Lot of things to attend to before landing." He touched the visor of his cap and turned away.

The mountains were closer when Conn looked forward again, and he glanced down. Five years and two space voyages ago, seen from the afterdeck of this ship or one of her sisters, the woods had been green with new foliage, and the wine-melon fields had been in pink blossom. He tried to picture the scene sliding away below instead of drawing in toward him, as though to force himself back to a moment of the irretrievable past.

But the moment was gone, and with it the eager excitement and the half-formed anticipations of the things he would learn and accomplish on Terra. The things he would learn—microbook case, one-fifty kilos, one. One of the steel trunks was full of things he had learned and accomplished, too. Maybe they, at least, had some value....

The woods were autumn-tinted now and the fields were bare and brown.

They had gotten the crop in early this year, for the fields had all been harvested. Those workers below must be going out for the wine-pressing. That extra hands were needed for that meant a big crop, and yet it seemed that less land was under cultivation than when he had gone away. He could see squares of low brush among the new forests that had grown up in the last forty years, and the few stands of original timber looked like hills above the second growth. Those trees had been standing when the planet had been colonized.

That had been two hundred years ago, at the middle of the Seventh Century, Atomic Era. The name of the planet—Poictesme—told that: the Surromanticist Movement, when the critics and professors were rediscovering James Branch Cabell.

Funny how much was coming back to him now—things he had picked up from the minimal liberal-arts and general-humanities courses he had taken and then forgotten in his absorption with the science and tech studies.

The first extrasolar planets, as they had been discovered, had been named

from Norse mythology—Odin and Baldur and Thor, Uller and Freya, Bifrost and Asgard and Niflheim. When the Norse names ran out, the discoverers had turned to other mythologies, Celtic and Egyptian and Hindu and Assyrian, and by the middle of the Seventh Century they were naming planets for almost anything.

Anything, that is, but actual persons; their names were reserved for stars. Like Alpha Gartner, the sun of Poictesme, and Beta Gartner, a buckshot-sized pink glow in the southeast, and Gamma Gartner, out of sight on the other side of the world, all named for old Genji Gartner, the scholarly and half-piratical adventurer whose ship had been the first to approach the three stars and discover that each of them had planets.

Forty-two planets in all, from a couple of methane-giants on Gamma to airless little things with one-sixth Terran gravity. Alpha II had been the only one in the Trisystem with an oxygen atmosphere and life. So Gartner had landed on it, and named it Poictesme, and the settlement that had grown up around the first landing site had been called Storisende. Thirty years later, Genji Gartner died there, after seeing the camp grow to a metropolis, and was buried under a massive monument.

Some of the other planets had been rich in metals, and mines had been opened, and atmosphere-domed factories and processing plants built. None of them could produce anything but hydroponic and tissue-culture foodstuffs, and natural foods from Poictesme had been less expensive, even on the planets of Gamma and Beta. So Poictesme had concentrated on agriculture and grown wealthy at it.

Then, within fifty years of Genji Gartner's death, the economics of interstellar trade overtook the Trisystem and the mines and factories closed down. It was no longer possible to ship the output to a profitable market, in the face of the growing self-sufficiency of the colonial planets and the irreducibly high cost of space-freighting.

Below, the brown fields and the red and yellow woods were merging into a ten-mile-square desert of crumbling concrete—empty and roofless sheds and warehouses and barracks, brush-choked parade grounds and landing fields, airship docks, and even a spaceport. They were more recent, dating from Poictesme's second brief and hectic prosperity, when the Terran Federation's Third Fleet-Army Force had occupied the Gartner Trisystem during the System States War.

Millions of troops had been stationed on or routed through Poictesme; tens of thousands of spacecraft had been based on the Trisystem; the mines and factories had reopened for war production. The Federation had spent trillions of sols on Poictesme, piled up mountains of stores and arms and equipment, left the face of the planet cluttered with installations.

Then, ten years before anybody had expected it, the rebellious System States

Alliance had collapsed and the war had ended. The Federation armies had gone home, taking with them the clothes they stood in, their personal weapons and a few souvenirs. Everything else had been left behind; even the most expensive equipment was worth less than the cost of removal.

Ever since, Poictesme had been living on salvage. The uniform the first officer was wearing was forty years old—and it was barely a month out of the original packing. On Terra, Conn had told his friends that his father was a prospector and let them interpret that as meaning an explorer for, say, uranium deposits. Rodney Maxwell found plenty of uranium, but he got it by taking apart the warheads of missiles.

The old replacement depot or classification center or training area or whatever it had been had vanished under the ship now and it was all forest back to the mountains, with an occasional cluster of deserted buildings. From one or two, threads of blue smoke rose—bands of farm tramps, camping on their way from harvest to wine-pressing. Then the eastern foothills were out of sight and he was looking down on the granite spines of the Calder Range; the valley beyond was sloping away and widening out in the distance, and it was time he began thinking of what to say when he landed. He would have to tell them, of course.

He wondered who would be at the dock to meet him, besides his family. Lynne Fawzi, he hoped. Or did he? Her parents would be with her, and Kurt Fawzi would take the news hardest of any of them, and be the first to blame him because it was bad. The hopes he had built for Lynne and himself would have to be held in abeyance till he saw how her father would regard him now.

But however any of them took it, he would have to tell them the truth.

The ship swept on, tearing through the thin puffs of cloud at ten miles a minute. Six minutes to landing. Five. Four. Then he saw the river bend, glinting redly through the haze in the sunlight; Litchfield was inside it, and he stared waiting for the first glimpse of the city. Three minutes, and the ship began to cut speed and lose altitude. The hot-jets had stopped firing and he could hear the whine of the cold-jet rotors.

Then he could see Litchfield, dominated by the Airport Building, so thick that it looked squat for all its height, like a candle-stump in a puddle of its own grease, the other buildings under their carapace of terraces and landing stages seeming to have flowed away from it. And there was the yellow block of the distilleries, and High Garden Terrace, and the Mall....

At first, in the distance, it looked like a living city. Then, second by second, the stigmata of decay became more and more evident. Terraces empty or littered with rubbish; gardens untended and choked with wild growth; windows staring blindly; walls splotched with lichens and grimy where the rains could not wash them.

For a moment, he was afraid that some disaster, unmentioned in his father's letters, had befallen. Then he realized that the change had not been in Litchfield but in himself. After five years, he was seeing it as it really was. He wondered how his family and his friends would look to him now. Or Lynne.

The ship was coming in over the Mall; he could see the cracked paving sprouting grass, the statues askew on their pedestals, the waterless fountains. He thought for an instant that one of them was playing, and then he saw that what he had taken for spray was dust blowing from the empty basin. There was something about dusty fountains, something he had learned at the University. Oh, yes. One of the Second Century Martian Colonial poets, Eirrarsson, or somebody like that:
The fountains are dusty in the Graveyard of Dreams;

The hinges are rusty and swing with tiny screams.

There was more to it, but he couldn't remember; something about empty gardens under an empty sky. There must have been colonies inside the Sol System, before the Interstellar Era, that hadn't turned out any better than Poictesme. Then he stopped trying to remember as the ship turned toward the Airport Building and a couple of tugs—Terran Federation contragravity tanks, with derrick-booms behind and push-poles where the guns had been—came up to bring her down.

He walked along the starboard promenade to the gangway, which the first mate and a couple of airmen were getting open.

Most of the population of top-level Litchfield was in the crowd on the dock. He recognized old Colonel Zareff, with his white hair and plum-brown skin, and Tom Brangwyn, the town marshal, red-faced and bulking above the others. It took a few seconds for him to pick out his father and mother, and his sister Flora, and then to realize that the handsome young man beside Flora was his brother Charley. Charley had been thirteen when Conn had gone away. And there was Kurt Fawzi, the mayor of Litchfield, and there was Lynne, beside him, her red-lipped face tilted upward with a cloud of bright hair behind it.

He waved to her, and she waved back, jumping in excitement, and then everybody was waving, and they were pushing his family to the front and making way for them.

The ship touched down lightly and gave a lurch as she went off contragravity, and they got the gangway open and the steps swung out, and he started down toward the people who had gathered to greet him.

His father was wearing the same black best-suit he had worn when they had parted five years ago. It had been new then; now it was shabby and had acquired a permanent wrinkle across the right hip, over the pistol-butt. Charley was carrying a gun, too; the belt and holster looked as though he had made them himself. His mother's dress was new and so was Flora's—probably made for the occasion.

He couldn't be sure just which of the Terran Federation services had provided the material, but Charley's shirt was Medical Service sterilon.

Ashamed that he was noticing and thinking of such things at a time like this, he clasped his father's hand and kissed his mother and Flora. Everybody was talking at once, saying things that he heard only as happy sounds. His brother's words were the first that penetrated as words.

"You didn't know me," Charley was accusing. "Don't deny it; I saw you standing there wondering if I was Flora's new boy friend or what."

"Well, how in Niflheim'd you expect me to? You've grown up since the last time I saw you. You're looking great, kid!" He caught the gleam of Lynne's golden hair beyond Charley's shoulder and pushed him gently aside. "Lynne!"

"Conn, you look just wonderful!" Her arms were around his neck and she was kissing him. "Am I still your girl, Conn?"

He crushed her against him and returned her kisses, assuring her that she was. He wasn't going to let it make a bit of difference how her father took the news—if she didn't.

She babbled on: "You didn't get mixed up with any of those girls on Terra, did you? If you did, don't tell me about it. All I care about is that you're back. Oh, Conn, you don't know how much I missed you ... Mother, Dad, doesn't he look just splendid?"

Kurt Fawzi, a little thinner, his face more wrinkled, his hair grayer, shook his hand.

"I'm just as glad to see you as anybody, Conn," he said, "even if I'm not being as demonstrative about it as Lynne. Judge, what do you think of our returned wanderer? Franz, shake hands with him, but save the interview for the *News* for later. Professor, here's one student Litchfield Academy won't need to be ashamed of."

He shook hands with them—old Judge Ledue; Franz Veltrin, the newsman; Professor Kellton; a dozen others, some of whom he had not thought of in five years. They were all cordial and happy—how much, he wondered, because he was their neighbor, Conn Maxwell, Rodney Maxwell's son, home from Terra, and how much because of what they hoped he would tell them? Kurt Fawzi, edging him out of the crowd, was the first to voice that.

"Conn, what did you find out?" he asked breathlessly. "Do you know where it is?"

Conn hesitated, looking about desperately; this was no time to start talking to Kurt Fawzi about it. His father was turning toward him from one side, and from the other Tom Brangwyn and Colonel Zareff were approaching more slowly, the older man leaning on a silver-headed cane.

"Don't bother him about it now, Kurt," Rodney Maxwell scolded the mayor. "He's just gotten off the ship; he hasn't had time to say hello to everybody yet."

"But, Rod, I've been waiting to hear what he's found out ever since he went away," Fawzi protested in a hurt tone.

Brangwyn and Colonel Zareff joined them. They were close friends, probably because neither of them was a native of Poictesme.

The town marshal had always been reticent about his origins, but Conn guessed it was Hathor. Brangwyn's heavy-muscled body, and his ease and grace in handling it, marked him as a man of a high-gravity planet. Besides, Hathor had a permanent cloud-envelope, and Tom Brangwyn's skin had turned boiled-lobster red under the dim orange sunlight of Alpha Gartner.

Old Klem Zareff never hesitated to tell anybody where he came from—he was from Ashmodai, one of the System States planets, and he had commanded a division that had been blasted down to about regimental strength, in the Alliance army.

"Hello, boy," he croaked, extending a trembling hand. "Glad you're home. We all missed you."

"We sure did, Conn," the town marshal agreed, clasping Conn's hand as soon as the old man had released it. "Find out anything definite?"

Kurt Fawzi looked at his watch. "Conn, we've planned a little celebration for you. We only had since day before yesterday, when the spaceship came into radio range, but we're having a dinner party for you at Senta's this evening."

"You couldn't have done anything I'd have liked better, Mr. Fawzi. I'd have to have a meal at Senta's before really feeling that I'd come home."

"Well, here's what I have in mind. It'll be three hours till dinner's ready. Suppose we all go up to my office in the meantime. It'll give the ladies a chance to go home and fix up for the party, and we can have a drink and a talk."

"You want to do that, Conn?" his father asked, a trifle doubtfully. "If you'd rather go home first..."

Something in his father's voice and manner disturbed him vaguely; however, he nodded agreement. After a couple of drinks, he'd be better able to tell them.

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Fawzi," Conn said. "I know you're all anxious, but it's a long story. This'll be a good chance to tell you."

Fawzi turned to his wife and daughter, interrupting himself to shout instructions to a couple of dockhands who were floating the baggage off the ship on a contragravity-lifter. Conn's father had sent Charley off with a message to his mother and Flora.

Conn turned to Colonel Zareff. "I noticed extra workers coming out from

the hiring agencies in Storisende, and the crop was all in across the Calders. Big wine-pressing this year?"

"Yes, we're up to our necks in melons," the old planter grumbled. "Gehenna of a big crop. Price'll drop like a brick of collapsium, and this time next year we'll be using brandy to wash our feet in."

"If you can't get good prices, hang onto it and age it. I wish you could see what the bars on Terra charge for a drink of ten-year-old Poictesme."

"This isn't Terra and we aren't selling it by the drink. Only place we can sell brandy is at Storisende spaceport, and we have to take what the trading-ship captains offer. You've been on a rich planet for the last five years, Conn. You've forgotten what it's like to live in a poorhouse. And that's what Poictesme is."

"Things'll be better from now on, Klem," the mayor said, putting one hand on the old man's shoulder and the other on Conn's. "Our boy's home. With what he can tell us, we'll be able to solve all our problems. Come on, let's go up and hear about it."

They entered the wide doorway of the warehouse on the dock-level floor of the Airport Building and crossed to the lift. About a dozen others had joined them, all the important men of Litchfield. Inside, Kurt Fawzi's laborers were floating out cargo for the ship—casks of brandy, of course, and a lot of boxes and crates painted light blue and marked with the wreathed globe of the Terran Federation and the gold triangle of the Third Fleet-Army Force and the eight-pointed red star of Ordnance Service. Long cases of rifles, square boxes of ammunition, machine guns, crated auto-cannon and rockets.

"Where'd that stuff come from?" Conn asked his father. "You dig it up?"

His father chuckled. "That happened since the last time I wrote you. Remember the big underground headquarters complex in the Calders? Everybody thought it had been all cleaned out years ago. You know, it's never a mistake to take a second look at anything that everybody believes. I found a lot of sealed-off sections over there that had never been entered. This stuff's from one of the headquarters defense armories. I have a gang getting the stuff out. Charley and I flew in after lunch, and I'm going back the first thing tomorrow."

"But there's enough combat equipment on hand to outfit a private army for every man, woman and child on Poictesme!" Conn objected. "Where are we going to sell this?"

"Storisende spaceport. The tramp freighters are buying it for newly colonized planets that haven't been industrialized yet. They don't pay much, but it doesn't cost much to get it out, and I've been clearing about three hundred sols a ton on the spaceport docks. That's not bad, you know."

Three hundred sols a ton. A lifter went by stacked with cases of M-504 submachine guns. Unloaded, one of them weighed six pounds, and even a used

one was worth a hundred sols. Conn started to say something about that, but then they came to the lift and were crowding onto it.

He had been in Kurt Fawzi's office a few times, always with his father, and he remembered it as a dim, quiet place of genteel conviviality and rambling conversations, with deep, comfortable chairs and many ashtrays. Fawzi's warehouse and brokerage business, and the airline agency, and the government, such as it was, of Litchfield, combined, made few demands on his time and did not prevent the office from being a favored loafing center for the town's elders. The lights were bright only over the big table that served, among other things, as a desk, and the walls were almost invisible in the shadows.

As they came down the hallway from the lift, everybody had begun speaking more softly. Voices were never loud or excited in Kurt Fawzi's office.

Tom Brangwyn went to the table, taking off his belt and holster and laying his pistol aside. The others, crowding into the room, added their weapons to his.

That was something else Conn was seeing with new eyes. It had been five years since he had carried a gun and he was wondering why any of them bothered. A gun was what a boy put on to show that he had reached manhood, and a man carried for the rest of his life out of habit.

Why, there wouldn't be a shooting a year in Litchfield, if you didn't count the farm tramps and drifters, who kept to the lower level or camped in the empty buildings at the edge of town. Or maybe that was it; maybe Litchfield was peaceful because everybody was armed. It certainly wasn't because of anything the Planetary Government at Storisende did to maintain order.

After divesting himself of his gun, Tom Brangwyn took over the bartending, getting out glasses and filling a pitcher of brandy from a keg in the corner.

"Everybody supplied?" Fawzi was asking. "Well, let's drink to our returned emissary. We're all anxious to hear what you found out, Conn. Gentlemen, here's to our friend Conn Maxwell. Welcome home, Conn!"

"Well, it's wonderful to be back, Mr. Fawzi—"

"No, let's not have any of this mister foolishness! You're one of the gang now. And drink up, everybody. We have plenty of brandy, even if we don't have anything else."

"You telling us, Kurt?" somebody demanded. One of the distillery company; the name would come back to Conn in a moment. "When this crop gets pressed and fermented—"

"When I start pressing, I don't know where in Gehenna I'm going to vat the stuff till it ferments," Colonel Zareff said. "Or why. You won't be able to handle all of it."

"Now, now!" Fawzi reproved. "Let's not start moaning about our troubles.

Not the day Conn's come home. Not when he's going to tell us how to find the Third Fleet-Army Force Brain."

"You *did* find out where the Brain is, didn't you, Conn?" Brangwyn asked anxiously.

That set half a dozen of them off at once. They had all sat down after the toast; now they were fidgeting in their chairs, leaning forward, looking at Conn fixedly.

"What did you find out, Conn?"

"It's still here on Poictesme, isn't it?"

"Did you find out where it is?"

He wanted to tell them in one quick sentence and get it over with. He couldn't, any more than he could force himself to squeeze the trigger of a pistol he knew would blow up in his hand.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen." He finished the brandy, and held out the glass to Tom Brangwyn, nodding toward the pitcher. Even the first drink had warmed him and he could feel the constriction easing in his throat and the lump at the pit of his stomach dissolving. "I hope none of you expect me to spread out a map and show you the cross on it, where the Brain is. I can't. I can't even give the approximate location of the thing."

Much of the happy eagerness drained out of the faces around him. Some of them were looking troubled; Colonel Zareff was gnawing the bottom of his mustache, and Judge Ledue's hand shook as he tried to relight his cigar. Conn stole a quick side-glance at his father; Rodney Maxwell was watching him curiously, as though wondering what he was going to say next.

"But it is still here on Poictesme?" Fawzi questioned. "They didn't take it away when they evacuated, did they?"

Conn finished his second drink. This time he picked up the pitcher and refilled for himself.

"I'm going to have to do a lot of talking," he said, "and it's going to be thirsty work. I'll have to tell you the whole thing from the beginning, and if you start asking questions at random, you'll get me mixed up and I'll miss the important points."

"By all means!" Judge Ledue told him. "Give it in your own words, in what you think is the proper order."

"Thank you, Judge."

Conn drank some more brandy, hoping he could get his courage up without getting drunk. After all, they had a right to a full report; all of them had contributed something toward sending him to Terra.

"The main purpose in my going to the University was to learn computer theory and practice. It wouldn't do any good for us to find the Brain if none of us

are able to use it. Well, I learned enough to be able to operate, program and service any computer in existence, and train assistants. During my last year at the University, I had a part-time paid job programming the big positron-neutrino-photon computer in the astrophysics department. When I graduated, I was offered a position as instructor in positronic computer theory.''

''You never mentioned that in your letters, son,'' his father said.

''It was too late for any letter except one that would come on the same ship I did. Beside, it wasn't very important.''

''I think it was.'' There was a catch in old Professor Kellton's voice. ''One of my boys, from the Academy, offered a place on the faculty of the University of Montevideo, on Terra!'' He poured himself a second drink, something he almost never did.

''Conn means it wasn't important because it didn't have anything to do with the Brain,'' Fawzi explained and then looked at Conn expectantly.

All right; now he'd tell them. ''I went over all the records of the Third Fleet-Army Force's occupation of Poictesme that are open to the public. On one pretext or another, I got permission to examine the non-classified files that aren't open to public examination. I even got a few peeps at some of the stuff that's still classified secret. I have maps and plans of all the installations that were built on this planet—literally thousands of them, many still undiscovered. Why, we haven't more than scratched the surface of what the Federation left behind here. For instance, all the important installations exist in duplicate, some even in triplicate, as a precaution against Alliance space attack.''

''Space attack!'' Colonel Zareff was indignant. ''There never was a time when the Alliance could have taken the offensive against Poictesme, even if an offensive outside our own space-area had been part of our policy. We just didn't have the ships. It took over a year to move a million and a half troops from Ashmodai to Marduk, and the fleet that was based on Amaterasu was blasted out of existence in the spaceports and in orbit. Hell, at the time of the surrender, we didn't have..''

''They weren't taking chances on that, Colonel. But the point I want to make is that with everything I did find, I never found, in any official record, a single word about the giant computer we call the Third Fleet-Army Force Brain.''

For a time, the only sound in the room was the tiny insectile humming of the electric clock on the wall. Then Professor Kellton set his glass on the table, and it sounded like a hammer-blow.

''Nothing, Conn?'' Kurt Fawzi was incredulous and, for the first time, frightened. The others were exchanging uneasy glances. ''But you must have! A thing like that—''

''Of course it would be one of the closest secrets during the war,'' somebody else said. ''But in forty years, you'd expect *something* to leak out.''

"Why, *during* the war, it was all through the Third Force. Even the Alliance knew about it; that's how Klem heard of it."

"Well, Conn couldn't just walk into the secret files and read whatever he wanted to. Just because he couldn't find anything—"

"Don't tell *me* about security!" Klem Zareff snorted. "Certainly they still have it classified; staff-brass'd rather lose an eye than declassify anything. If you'd seen the lengths our staff went to—hell, we lost battles because the staff wouldn't release information the troops in the field needed. I remember once—"

"But there *was* a Brain," Judge Ledue was saying, to reassure himself and draw agreement from the others. "It was capable of combining data, and scanning and evaluating all its positronic memories, and forming association patterns, and reasoning with absolute perfection. It was more than a positronic brain—it was a positronic super-mind."

"We'd have won the war, except for the Brain. We had ninety systems, a hundred and thirty inhabited planets, a hundred billion people—and we were on the defensive in our own space-area! Every move we made was known and anticipated by the Federation. How could they have done that without something like the Brain?"

"Conn, from what you learned of computers, how large a volume of space would you say the Brain would have to occupy?" Professor Kellton asked.

Professor Kellton was the most unworldly of the lot, yet he was asking the most practical question.

"Well, the astrophysics computer I worked with at the University occupies a total of about one million cubic feet," Conn began. This was his chance; they'd take anything he told them about computers as gospel. "It was only designed to handle problems in astrophysics. The Brain, being built for space war, would have to handle any such problem. And if half the stories about the Brain are anywhere near true, it handled any other problem—mathematical, scientific, political, economic, strategic, psychological, even philosophical and ethical. Well, I'd say that a hundred million cubic feet would be the smallest even conceivable."

They all nodded seriously. They were willing to accept that—or anything else, except one thing.

"Lot of places on this planet where a thing that size could be hidden," Tom Brangwyn said, undismayed. "A planet's a mighty big place."

"It could be under water, in one of the seas," Piet Dawes, the banker, suggested. "An underwater dome city wouldn't be any harder to build than a dome city on a poison-atmosphere planet like Tubal-Cain."

"It might even be on Tubal-Cain," a melon-planter said. "Or Hiawatha, or even one of the Beta or Gamma planets. The Third Force was occupying the whole Trisystem, you know." He thought for a moment. "If I'd been in charge, I'd have

put it on one of the moons of Pantagruel."

"But that's clear out in the Alpha System," Judge Ledue objected. "We don't have a spaceship on the planet, certainly nothing with a hyperdrive engine. And it would take a lifetime to get out to the Gamma System and back on reaction drive."

Conn put his empty brandy glass on the table and sat erect. A new thought had occurred to him, chasing out of his mind all the worries and fears he had brought with him all the way from Terra.

"Then we'll have to build a ship," he said calmly. "I know, when the Federation evacuated Poictesme, they took every hyperdrive ship with them. But they had plenty of shipyards and spaceports on this planet, and I have maps showing the location of all of them, and barely a third of them have been discovered so far. I'm sure we can find enough hulks, and enough hyperfield generator parts, to assemble a ship or two, and I know we'll find the same or better on some of the other planets.

"And here's another thing," he added. "When we start looking into some of the dome-city plants on Tubal-Cain and Hiawatha and Moruna and Koshchei, we may find the plant or plants where the components for the Brain were fabricated, and if we do, we may find records of where they were shipped, and that'll be it."

"You're right!" Professor Kellton cried, quivering with excitement. "We've been hunting at random for the Brain, so it would only be an accident if we found it. We'll have to do this systematically, and with Conn to help us—Conn, why not build a computer? I don't mean another Brain; I mean a computer to help us find the Brain."

"We can, but we may not even need to build one. When we get out to the industrial planets, we may find one ready except for perhaps some minor alterations."

"But how are we going to finance all this?" Klem Zareff demanded querulously. "We're poorer than snakes, and even one hyperdrive ship's going to cost like Gehenna."

"I've been thinking about that, Klem," Fawzi said. "If we can find material at these shipyards Conn knows about, most of our expense will be labor. Well, haven't we ten workmen competing for every job? They don't really need money, only the things money can buy. We can raise food on the farms and provide whatever else they need out of Federation supplies."

"Sure. As soon as it gets around that we're really trying to do something about this, everybody'll want in on it," Tom Brangwyn predicted.

"And I have no doubt that the Planetary Government at Storisende will give us assistance, once we show that this is a practical and productive enterprise," Judge Ledue put in. "I have some slight influence with the President and—"

"I'm not too sure we want the Government getting into this," Kurt Fawzi replied. "Give them half a chance and that gang at Storisende'll squeeze us right out."

"We can handle this ourselves," Brangwyn agreed. "And when we get some kind of a ship and get out to the other two systems, or even just to Tubal-Cain or Hiawatha, first thing you know, we'll *be* the Planetary Government."

"Well, now, Tom," Fawzi began piously, "the Brain is too big a thing for a few of us to try to monopolize; it'll be for all Poictesme. Of course, it's only proper that we, who are making the effort to locate it, should have the direction of that effort...."

While Fawzi was talking, Rodney Maxwell went to the table, rummaged his pistol out of the pile and buckled it on. The mayor stopped short.

"You leaving us, Rod?"

"Yes, it's getting late. Conn and I are going for a little walk; we'll be at Senta's in half an hour. The fresh air will do both of us good and we have a lot to talk about. After all, we haven't seen each other for over five years."

They were silent, however, until they were away from the Airport Building and walking along High Garden Terrace in the direction of the Mall. Conn was glad; his own thoughts were weighing too heavily within him: I didn't do it. I was going to do it; every minute, I was going to do it, and I didn't, and now it's too late.

"That was quite a talk you gave them, son," his father said. "They believed every word of it. A couple of times, I even caught myself starting to believe it."

Conn stopped short. His father stopped beside him and stood looking at him.

"Why didn't you tell them the truth?" Rodney Maxwell asked.

The question angered Conn. It was what he had been asking himself.

"Why didn't I just grab a couple of pistols off the table and shoot the lot of them?" he retorted. "It would have killed them quicker and wouldn't have hurt as much."

His father took the cigar from his mouth and inspected the tip of it. "The truth must be pretty bad then. There is no Brain. Is that it, son?"

"There never was one. I'm not saying that only because I know it would be impossible to build such a computer. I'm telling you what the one man in the Galaxy who ought to know told me—the man who commanded the Third Force during the War."

"Foxx Travis! I didn't know he was still alive. You actually talked to him?"

"Yes. He's on Luna, keeping himself alive at low gravity. It took me a couple of years, and I was afraid he'd die before I got to him, but I finally managed to see him."

"What did he tell you?"

"That no such thing as the Brain ever existed." They started walking again, more slowly, toward the far edge of the terrace, with the sky red and orange in front of them. "The story was all through the Third Force, but it was just one of those wild tales that get started, nobody knows how, among troops. The High Command never denied or even discouraged it. It helped morale, and letting it leak to the enemy was good psychological warfare."

"Klem Zareff says that everybody in the Alliance army heard of the Brain," his father said. "That was why he came here in the first place." He puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. "You said a computer like the Brain would be an impossibility. Why? Wouldn't it be just another computer, only a lot bigger and a lot smarter?"

"Dad, computermen don't like to hear computers called smart," Conn said. "They aren't. The people who build them are smart; a computer only knows what's fed to it. They can hold more information in their banks than a man can in his memory, they can combine it faster, they don't get tired or absent-minded. But they can't imagine, they can't create, and they can't do anything a human brain can't."

"You know, I'd wondered about just that," said his father. "And none of the histories of the War even as much as mentioned the Brain. And I couldn't see why, after the War, they didn't build dozens of them to handle all these Galactic political and economic problems that nobody seems able to solve. A thing like the Brain wouldn't only be useful for war; the people here aren't trying to find it for war purposes."

"You didn't mention any of these doubts to the others, did you?"

"They were just doubts. You knew for sure, and you couldn't tell them."

"I'd come home intending to—tell them there was no Brain, tell them to stop wasting their time hunting for it and start trying to figure out the answers themselves. But I couldn't. They don't believe in the Brain as a tool, to use; it's a machine god that they can bring all their troubles to. You can't take a thing like that away from people without giving them something better."

"I noticed you suggested building a spaceship and agreed with the professor about building a computer. What was your idea? To take their minds off hunting for the Brain and keep them busy?"

Conn shook his head. "I'm serious about the ship—ships. You and Colonel Zareff gave me that idea."

His father looked at him in surprise. "I never said a word in there, and Klem didn't even once mention—"

"Not in Kurt's office; before we went up from the docks. There was Klem, moaning about a good year for melons as though it were a plague, and you selling arms and ammunition by the ton. Why, on Terra or Baldur or Uller, a glass of our

brandy brings more than these freighter-captains give us for a cask, and what do you think a colonist on Agramma, or Sekht, or Hachiman, who has to fight for his life against savages and wild animals, would pay for one of those rifles and a thousand rounds of ammunition?"

His father objected. "We can't base the whole economy of a planet on brandy. Only about ten per cent of the arable land on Poictesme will grow wine-melons. And if we start exporting Federation salvage the way you talk of, we'll be selling pieces instead of job lots. We'll net more, but—"

"That's just to get us started. The ships will be used, after that, to get to Tubal-Cain and Hiawatha and the planets of the Beta and Gamma Systems. What I want to see is the mines and factories reopened, people employed, wealth being produced."

"And where'll we sell what we produce? Remember, the mines closed down because there was no more market."

"No more interstellar market, that's true. But there are a hundred and fifty million people on Poictesme. That's a big enough market and a big enough labor force to exploit the wealth of the Gartner Trisystem. We can have prosperity for everybody on our own resources. Just what do we need that we have to get from outside now?"

His father stopped again and sat down on the edge of a fountain—the same one, possibly, from which Conn had seen dust blowing as the airship had been coming in.

"Conn, that's a dangerous idea. That was what brought on the System States War. The Alliance planets took themselves outside the Federation economic orbit and the Federation crushed them."

Conn swore impatiently. "You've been listening to old Klem Zareff ranting about the Lost Cause and the greedy Terran robber barons holding the Galaxy in economic serfdom while they piled up profits. The Federation didn't fight that war for profits; there weren't any profits to fight for. They fought it because if the System States had won, half of them would be at war among themselves now. Make no mistake about it, politically I'm all for the Federation. But economically, I want to see our people exploiting their own resources for themselves, instead of grieving about lost interstellar trade, and bewailing bumper crops, and searching for a mythical robot god."

"You think, if you can get something like that started, that they'll forget about the Brain?" his father asked skeptically.

"That crowd up in Kurt Fawzi's office? Niflheim, no! They'll go on hunting for the Brain as long as they live, and every day they'll be expecting to find it tomorrow. That'll keep them happy. But they're all old men. The ones I'm interested in are the boys of Charley's age. I'm going to give them too many real things to do—

building ships, exploring the rest of the Trisystem, opening mines and factories, producing wealth—for them to get caught in that empty old dream."

He looked down at the dusty fountain on which his father sat. "That ghost-dream haunts this graveyard. I want to give them living dreams that they can make come true."

Conn's father sat in silence for a while, his cigar smoke red in the sunset. "If you can do all that, Conn.... You know, I believe you can. I'm with you, as far as I can help, and we'll have a talk with Charley. He's a good boy, Conn, and he has a lot of influence among the other youngsters." He looked at his watch. "We'd better be getting along. You don't want to be late for your own coming-home party."

Rodney Maxwell slid off the edge of the fountain to his feet, hitching at the gunbelt under his coat. Have to dig out his own gun and start wearing it, Conn thought. A man simply didn't go around in public without a gun in Litchfield. It wasn't decent. And he'd be spending a lot of time out in the brush, where he'd really need one.

First thing in the morning, he'd unpack that trunk and go over all those maps. There were half a dozen spaceports and maintenance shops and shipyards within a half-day by airboat, none of which had been looted. He'd look them all over; that would take a couple of weeks. Pick the best shipyard and concentrate on it. Kurt Fawzi'd be the man to recruit labor. Professor Kellton was a scholar, not a scientist. He didn't know beans about hyperdrive engines, but he knew how to do library research.

They came to the edge of High Garden Terrace at the escalator, long motionless, its moving parts rusted fast, that led down to the Mall, and at the bottom of it was Senta's, the tables under the open sky.

A crowd was already gathering. There was Tom Brangwyn, and there was Kurt Fawzi and his wife, and Lynne. And there was Senta herself, fat and dumpy, in one of her preposterous red-and-purple dresses, bustling about, bubbling happily one moment and screaming invective at some laggard waiter the next.

The dinner, Conn knew, would be the best he had eaten in five years, and afterward they would sit in the dim glow of Beta Gartner, sipping coffee and liqueurs, smoking and talking and visiting back and forth from one table to another, as they always did in the evenings at Senta's. Another bit from Eirrarsson's poem came back to him:

We sit in the twilight, the shadows among,

And we talk of the happy days when we were brave and young.

That was for the old ones, for Colonel Zareff and Judge Ledue and Dolf Kellton, maybe even for Tom Brangwyn and Franz Veltrin and for his father. But his brother Charley and the boys of his generation would have a future to talk about. And so would he, and Lynne Fawzi.

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

A great politician need not be a statesman ... but it is inherently futile to be a great statesman, and no politician. Except, of course, for a miracle ...

The tumult in Convention Hall was a hurricane of sound that lashed at a sea of human beings that surged and eddied around the broad floor. Men and women, delegates and spectators, aged party wheelhorses and youngsters who would vote for the first time that November, all lost their identities to merge with that swirling tide. Over their heads, like agitated bits of flotsam, pennants fluttered and placards rose and dipped. Beneath their feet, discarded metal buttons that bore the names of two or three "favorite sons" and those that had touted the only serious contender against the party's new candidate were trodden flat. None of them had ever really had a chance.

The buttons that were now pinned on every lapel said: "Blast 'em With Cannon!" or "Cannon Can Do!" The placards and the box-shaped signs, with a trifle more dignity, said: WIN WITH CANNON and CANNON FOR PRESIDENT and simply JAMES H. CANNON.

Occasionally, in the roar of noise, there were shouts of "Cannon! Cannon! Rah! Rah! Rah! Cannon! Cannon! Sis-boom-bah!" and snatches of old popular tunes hurriedly set with new words:

On with Cannon, on with Cannon!

White House, here we come!

He's a winner, no beginner;

He can get things done!

(Rah! Rah! Rah!)

And, over in one corner, a group of college girls were enthusiastically chanting:

He is handsome! He is sexy!

We want J. H. C. for Prexy!

It was a demonstration that lasted nearly three times as long as the eighty-

five-minute demonstration that had occurred when Representative Matson had first proposed his name for the party's nomination.

Spatially, Senator James Harrington Cannon was four blocks away from Convention Hall, in a suite at the Statler-Hilton, but electronically, he was no farther away than the television camera that watched the cheering multitude from above the floor of the hall.

The hotel room was tastefully and expensively decorated, but neither the senator nor any of the other men in the room were looking at anything else except the big thirty-six-inch screen that glowed and danced with color. The network announcer's words were almost inaudible, since the volume had been turned way down, but his voice sounded almost as excited as those from the convention floor.

Senator Cannon's broad, handsome face showed a smile that indicated pleasure, happiness, and a touch of triumph. His dark, slightly wavy hair, with the broad swathes of silver at the temples, was a little disarrayed, and there was a splash of cigarette ash on one trouser leg, but otherwise, even sitting there in his shirt sleeves, he looked well-dressed. His wide shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist and lean hips, and he looked a good ten years younger than his actual fifty-two.

He lit another cigarette, but a careful scrutiny of his face would have revealed that, though his eyes were on the screen, his thoughts were not in Convention Hall.

Representative Matson, looking like an amazed bulldog, managed to chew and puff on his cigar simultaneously and still speak understandable English. "Never saw anything like it. Never. First ballot and you had it, Jim. I know Texas was going to put up Perez as a favorite son on the first ballot, but they couldn't do anything except jump on the bandwagon by the time the vote reached them. Unanimous on the first ballot."

Governor Spanding, a lantern-jawed, lean man sitting on the other side of Senator Cannon, gave a short chuckle and said, "Came close not t' being unanimous. The delegate from Alabama looked as though he was going to stick to his 'One vote for Byron Beauregarde Cadwallader' until Cadwallader himself went over to make him change his vote before the first ballot was complete."

The door opened, and a man came in from the other room. He bounced in on the balls of his feet, clapped his hands together, and dry-washed them briskly. "We're in!" he said, with businesslike glee. "Image, gentlemen! That's what does it: Image!" He was a tall, rather bony-faced man in his early forties, and his manner was that of the self-satisfied businessman who is quite certain that he knows all of the answers and all of the questions. "Create an image that the public goes for, and you're in!"

Senator Cannon turned his head around and grinned. "Thanks, Horvin, but

let's remember that we still have an election to win."

"We'll win it," Horvin said confidently. "A properly projected image attracts the public—"

"Oh, crud," said Representative Matson in a growly voice. "The opposition has just as good a staff of PR men as we do. If we beat 'em, it'll be because we've got a better man, not because we've got better public relations."

"Of course," said Horvin, unabashed. "We can project a better image because we've got better material to work with. We—"

"Jim managed to get elected to the Senate without any of your help, and he went in with an avalanche. If there's any 'image projecting' done around here, Jim is the one who does it."

Horvin nodded his head as though he were in complete agreement with Matson. "Exactly. His natural ability plus the scientific application of mass psychology make an unbeatable team."

Matson started to say something, but Senator Cannon cut in first. "He's right, Ed. We've got to use every weapon we have to win this election. Another four years of the present policies, and the Sino-Russian Bloc will be able to start unilateral disarmament. They won't have to start a war to bury us."

Horvin looked nervous. "Uh ... Senator—"

Cannon made a motion in the air. "I know, I know. Our policy during the campaign will be to run down the opposition, not the United States. We are still in a strong position, but if this goes on—Don't worry, Horvin; the whole thing will be handled properly."

Before any of them could say anything, Senator Cannon turned to Representative Matson and said: "Ed, will you get Matthew Fisher on the phone? And the Governor of Pennsylvania and ... let's see ... Senator Hidekai and Joe Vitelli."

"I didn't even know Fisher was here," Matson said. "What do you want him for?"

"I just want to talk to him, Ed. Get him up here, with the others, will you?"

"Sure, Jim; sure." He got up and walked over to the phone.

Horvin, the PR man, said: "Well, Senator, now that you're the party's candidate for the Presidency of the United States, who are you going to pick for your running mate? Vollinger was the only one who came even close to giving you a run for your money, and it would be good public relations if you chose him. He's got the kind of personality that would make a good image."

"Horvin," the senator said kindly, "I'll pick the men; you build the image from the raw material I give you. You're the only man I know who can convince the public that a sow's ear is really a silk purse, and you may have to do just that.

"You can start right now. Go down and get hold of the news boys and tell

them that the announcement of my running mate will be made as soon as this demonstration is over.

"Tell them you can't give them any information other than that, but give them the impression that you already know. Since you don't know, don't try to guess; that way you won't let any cats out of the wrong bags. But you do know that he's a fine man, and you're pleased as all hell that I made such a good choice. Got that?"

Horvin grinned. "Got it. You pick the man; I'll build the image." He went out the door.

When the door had closed, Governor Spanding said: "So it's going to be Fisher, is it?"

"You know too much, Harry," said Senator Cannon, grinning. "Remind me to appoint you ambassador to Patagonia after Inauguration Day."

"If I lose the election at home, I may take you up on it. But why Matthew Fisher?"

"He's a good man, Harry."

"Hell yes, he is," the governor said. "Tops. I've seen his record as State Attorney General and as Lieutenant Governor. And when Governor Dinsmore died three years ago, Fisher did a fine job filling out his last year. But—"

"But he couldn't get re-elected two years ago," Senator Cannon said. "He couldn't keep the governor's office, in spite of the great job he'd done."

"That's right. He's just not a politician, Jim. He doesn't have the ... the personality, the flash, whatever it is that it takes to get a man elected by the people. I've got it; you sure as hell have it; Fisher doesn't."

"That's why I've got Horvin working for us," said Senator Cannon. "Whether I need him or not may be a point of argument. Whether Matthew Fisher needs him or not is a rhetorical question."

Governor Spanding lit a cigarette in silence while he stared at the quasi-riot that was still coming to the screen from Convention Hall. Then he said: "You've been thinking of Matt Fisher all along, then."

"Not Patagonia," said the senator. "Tibet."

"I'll shut up if you want me to, Jim."

"No. Go ahead."

"All right. Jim, I trust your judgment. I've got no designs on the Vice Presidency myself, and you know it. I like to feel that, if I had, you'd give me a crack at it. No, don't answer that, Jim; just let me talk.

"What I'm trying to say is that there are a lot of good men in the party who'd make fine VP's; men who've given their all to get you the nomination, and who'll work even harder to see that you're elected. Why pass them up in favor of a vir-

tual unknown like Matt Fisher?"

Senator Cannon didn't say anything. He knew that Spanding didn't want an answer yet.

"The trouble with Fisher," Spanding went on, "is that he ... well, he's too autocratic. He pulls decisions out of midair. He—" Spanding paused, apparently searching for a way to express himself. Senator Cannon said nothing; he waited expectantly.

"Take a look at the Bossard Decision," Spanding said. "Fisher was Attorney General for his state at the time.

"Bossard was the Mayor of Waynesville—twelve thousand and something population, I forget now. Fisher didn't even know Bossard. But when the big graft scandal came up there in Waynesville, Fisher wouldn't prosecute. He didn't actually refuse, but he hemmed and hawed around for five months before he really started the State's machinery to moving. By that time, Bossard had managed to get enough influence behind him so that he could beat the rap.

"When the case came to trial in the State Supreme Court, Matt Fisher told the Court that it was apparent that Mayor Bossard was the victim of the local district attorney and the chief of police of Waynesville. In spite of the evidence against him, Bossard was acquitted." Spanding took a breath to say something more, but Senator James Cannon interrupted him.

"Not 'acquitted', Harry. 'Exonerated'. Bossard never even should have come to trial," the senator said. "He was a popular, buddy-buddy sort of guy who managed to get himself involved as an unwitting figurehead. Bossard simply wasn't—and isn't—very bright. But he was a friendly, outgoing, warm sort of man who was able to get elected through the auspices of the local city machine. Remember Jimmy Walker?"

Spanding nodded. "Yes, but—"

"Same thing," Cannon cut in. "Bossard was innocent, as far as any criminal intent was concerned, but he was too easy on his so-called friends. He—"

"Oh, crud, Jim!" the governor interrupted vehemently. "That's the same whitewash that Matthew Fisher gave him! The evidence would have convicted Bossard if Fisher hadn't given him time to cover up!"

Senator James Cannon suddenly became angry. He jammed his own cigarette butt into the ash tray, turned toward Spanding, and snapped: "Harry, just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that Bossard wasn't actually guilty. Let's suppose that the Constitution of the United States is really true—that a man isn't guilty until he's proven guilty.

"Just suppose"—his voice and expression became suddenly acid—"that

Bossard was not guilty. Try that, huh? Pretend, somewhere in your own little mind, that a mere accusation—no matter what the evidence—doesn't prove anything! Let's just make a little game between the two of us that the ideal of Equality Under the Law means what it says. Want to play?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"O.K.," Cannon went on angrily. "O.K. Then let's suppose that Bossard really was stupid. He could have been framed easily, couldn't he? He could have been set up as a patsy, couldn't he? Couldn't he?"

"Well, sure, but—"

"Sure! Then go on and suppose that the prosecuting attorney had sense enough to see that Bossard had been framed. Suppose further that the prosecutor was enough of a human being to know that Bossard either had to be convicted or completely exonerated. What would he do?"

Governor Spanding carefully put his cigarette into the nearest ash tray. "If that were the case, I'd completely exonerate him. I wouldn't leave it hanging. Matt Fisher didn't do anything but make sure that Bossard couldn't be legally convicted; he didn't prove that Bossard was innocent."

"And what was the result, as far as Bossard was concerned?" the senator asked.

Spanding looked around at the senator, staring Cannon straight in the face. "The result was that Bossard was left hanging, Jim. If I go along with you and assume that Bossard was innocent, then Fisher fouled up just as badly as he would have if he'd fluffed the prosecution of a guilty man. Either a man is guilty, or he's innocent. If, according to your theory, the prosecutor knows he's innocent, then he should exonerate the innocent man! If not, he should do his best to convict!"

"He should?" snapped Cannon. "He should? Harry, you're letting your idealism run away with you! If Bossard were guilty, he should have been convicted—sure! But if he were innocent, should he be exonerated? Should he be allowed to run again for office? Should the people be allowed to think that he was lily-white? Should they be allowed to re-elect a nitwit who'd do the same thing again because he was too stupid to see that he was being used?

"No!" He didn't let the governor time to speak; he went on: "Matthew Fisher set it up perfectly. He exonerated Bossard enough to allow the ex-mayor to continue in private life without any question. But —there remained just enough question to keep him out of public office for the rest of his life. Was that wrong, Harry? Was it?"

Spanding looked blankly at the senator for a moment, then his expression slowly changed to one of grudging admiration. "Well ... if you put it that way ... yeah. I mean, no; it wasn't wrong. It was the only way to play it." He dropped his cigarette into a nearby ash tray. "O.K., Jim; you win. I'll back Fisher all the way."

"Thanks, Harry," Cannon said. "Now, if we—"

Congressman Matson came back into the room, saying, "I got 'em, Jim. Five or ten minutes, they'll be here. Which one of 'em is it going to be?"

"Matt Fisher, if we can come to an agreement," Cannon said, watching Matson's face closely.

Matson chewed at his cigar for a moment, then nodded. "He'll do. Not much political personality, but, hell, he's only running for Veep. We can get him through." He took the cigar out of his mouth. "How do you want to run it?"

"I'll talk to Fisher in my bedroom. You and Harry hold the others in here with the usual chitchat. Tell 'em I'm thinking over the choice of my running mate, but don't tell 'em I've made up my mind yet. If Matt Fisher doesn't want it, we can tell the others that Matt and I were simply talking over the possibilities. I don't want anyone to think he's second choice. Got it?"

Matson nodded. "Whatever you say, Jim."

That year, late August was a real blisterer along the eastern coast of the United States. The great megalopolis that sprawled from Boston to Baltimore in utter scorn of state boundaries sweltered in the kind of atmosphere that is usually only found in the pressing rooms of large tailor shops. Consolidated Edison, New York's Own Power Company, was churning out multimegawatts that served to air condition nearly every enclosed place on the island of Manhattan—which served only to make the open streets even hotter. The power plants in the Bronx, west Brooklyn, and east Queens were busily converting hydrogen into helium and energy, and the energy was being used to convert humid air at ninety-six Fahrenheit into dry air at seventy-one Fahrenheit. The subways were crowded with people who had no intention of going anywhere in particular; they just wanted to retreat from the hot streets to the air-conditioned bowels of the city.

But the heat that can be measured by thermometers was not the kind that was causing two groups of men in two hotels, only a few blocks apart on the East Side of New York's Midtown, to break out in sweat, both figurative and literal.

One group was ensconced in the Presidential Suite of the New Waldorf—the President and Vice President of the United States, both running for re-election, and other high members of the incumbent party.

The other group, consisting of Candidates Cannon and Fisher, and the high members of their party, were occupying the only slightly less pretentious Bridal Suite of a hotel within easy walking distance of the Waldorf.

Senator James Cannon read through the news release that Horvin had handed him, then looked up at the PR man. "This is right off the wire. How long before it's made public?"

Horvin glanced at his watch. "Less than half an hour. There's an NBC news program at five-thirty. Maybe before, if one of the radio stations think it's impor-

tant enough for a bulletin break."

"That means that it will have been common knowledge for four hours by the time we go on the air for the debate," said Cannon.

Horvin nodded, still looking at his watch. "And even if some people miss the TV broadcast, they'll be able to read all about it. The deadline for the Daily Register is at six; the papers will hit the streets at seven-fifteen, or thereabouts."

Cannon stood up from his chair. "Get your men out on the streets. Get 'em into bars, where they can pick up reactions to this. I want as good a statistical sampling as you can get in so short a time. It'll have to be casual; I don't want your men asking questions as though they were regular pollsters; just find out what the general trend is."

"Right." Horvin got out fast.

The other men in the room were looking expectantly at the senator. He paused for a moment, glancing around at them, and then looked down at the paper and said: "This is a bulletin from Tass News Agency, Moscow." Then he began reading.

"Russian Luna Base One announced that at 1600 Greenwich Standard Time (12:00 N EDST) a presumed spacecraft of unknown design was damaged by Russian rockets and fell to the surface of Luna somewhere in the Mare Serenitas, some three hundred fifty miles from the Soviet base. The craft was hovering approximately four hundred miles above the surface when spotted by Soviet radar installations. Telescopic inspection showed that the craft was not—repeat: not—powered by rockets. Since it failed to respond to the standard United Nations recognition signals, rockets were fired to bring it down. In attempting to avoid the rockets, the craft, according to observers, maneuvered in an entirely unorthodox manner, which cannot be attributed to a rocket drive. A nearby burst, however, visibly damaged the hull of the craft, and it dropped toward Mare Serenitas. Armed Soviet moon-cats are, at this moment, moving toward the downed craft.

"Base Commander Colonel A. V. Gryaznov is quoted as saying: 'There can be no doubt that we shall learn much from this craft, since it is apparently of extraterrestrial origin. We will certainly be able to overpower any resistance it may offer, since it has already proved vulnerable to our weapons. The missiles which were fired toward our base were easily destroyed by our own antimissile missiles, and the craft was unable to either destroy or avoid our own missiles.'

"Further progress will be released by the Soviet Government as it occurs."

Senator Cannon dropped the sheet of paper to his side. "That's it. Matt, come in the bedroom; I'd like to talk to you."

Matthew Fisher, candidate for Vice President of the United States, heaved his two-hundred-fifty-pound bulk out of the chair he had been sitting in and followed the senator into the other room. Behind them, the others suddenly broke

out into a blather of conversation. Fisher's closing of the door cut the sound off abruptly.

Senator Cannon threw the newssheet on the nearest bed and swung around to face Matthew Fisher. He looked at the tall, thick, muscular man trying to detect the emotions behind the ugly-handsome face that had been battered up by football and boxing in college, trying to fathom the thoughts beneath the broad forehead and the receding hairline.

"You got any idea what this really means, Matt?" he asked after a second.

Fisher's blue-gray eyes widened almost imperceptibly, and his gaze sharpened. "Not until just this moment," he said.

Cannon looked suddenly puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Fisher said thoughtfully, "you wouldn't ask me unless it meant something more than appears on the surface." He grinned rather apologetically. "I'm sorry, Jim; it takes a second or two to reconstruct exactly what did go through my mind." His grin faded into a thoughtful frown. "Anyway, you asked me, and since you're head of the Committee on SPACE Travel and Exploration—" He spread his hands in a gesture that managed to convey both futility and apology. "The mystery spacecraft is ours," he said decisively.

James Cannon wiped a palm over his forehead and sat down heavily on one of the beds. "Right. Sit down. Fine. Now; listen: We—the United States—have a space drive that compares to the rocket in the same way that the jet engine compares to the horse. We've been keeping it under wraps that are comparable to those the Manhattan Project was kept under 'way back during World War II. Maybe more so. But—" He stopped, watching Fisher's face. Then: "Can you see it from there?"

"I think so," Fisher said. "The Soviet Government knows that we have something ... in fact, they've known it for a long time. They don't know what, though." He found a heavy briar in his pocket, pulled it out, and began absently stuffing it with tobacco from a pouch he'd pulled out with the pipe. "Our ship didn't shoot at their base. Couldn't, wouldn't have. Um. They shot it down to try to look it over. Purposely made a near-miss with an atomic warhead." He struck a match and puffed the pipe alight.

"Hm-m-m. The Soviet Government," he went on, "must have known that we had something 'way back when they signed the Greenston Agreement." Fisher blew out a cloud of smoke. "They wanted to change the wording of that, as I remember."

"That's right," Cannon said. "We wanted it to read that 'any advances in rocket engineering shall be shared equally among the Members of the United Nations', but the Soviet delegation wanted to change that to 'any advances in space travel'. We only beat them out by a verbal quibble; we insisted that the word

'space', as used, could apply equally to the space between continents or cities or, for that matter, between any two points. By the time we got through arguing, the UN had given up on the Soviet amendment, and the agreement was passed as was."

"Yeah," said Fisher, "I remember. So now we have a space drive that doesn't depend on rockets, and the USSR wants it." He stared at the bowl of his briar for a moment, then looked up at Cannon. "The point is that they've brought down one of our ships, and we have to get it out of there before the Russians get to it. Even if we manage to keep them from finding out anything about the drive, they can raise a lot of fuss in the UN if they can prove that it's our ship."

"Right. They'll ring in the Greenston Agreement even if the ship technically isn't a rocket," Cannon said. "Typical Soviet tactics. They try to time these things to hit at the most embarrassing moments. Four years ago, our worthy opponent got into office because our administration was embarrassed by the Madagascar Crisis. They simply try to show the rest of the world that, no matter which party is in, the United states is run by a bunch of inept fools." He slapped his hand down on the newssheet that lay near him. "This may win us the election," he said angrily, "but it will do us more harm in the long run than if our worthy opponent stayed in the White House."

"Of what avail to win an election and lose the whole Solar System," Fisher paraphrased. "It looks as though the President has a hot potato."

"'Hot' is the word. Pure californium-254." Cannon lit a cigarette and looked moodily at the glowing end. "But this puts us in a hole, too. Do we, or don't we, mention it on the TV debate this evening? If we don't, the public will wonder why; if we do, we'll put the country on the spot."

Matt Fisher thought for a few seconds. Then he said, "The ship must have already been having trouble. Otherwise it wouldn't have been hovering in plain sight of the Soviet radar. How many men does one of those ships hold?"

"Two," the senator told him.

"We do have more than one of those ships, don't we?" Fisher asked suddenly.

"Four on Moon Base; six more building," said Senator Cannon.

"The downed ship must have been in touch with—" He stopped abruptly, paused for a second, then said: "I have an idea, Senator, but you'll have to do the talking. We'll have to convince the President that what we're suggesting is for the good of the country and not just a political trick. And we don't have much time. Those moon-cats shouldn't take more than twelve or fifteen hours to reach the ship."

"What's your idea?"

"Well, it's pretty rough right now; we can't fill in the details until we get

more information, but—" He knocked the dottle from his pipe and began outlining his scheme to the senator.

Major Valentin Udovichenko peered through the "windshield" of his moon-cat and slowed the vehicle down as he saw the glint of metal on the Earthlit plain ahead. "Captain!" he snapped. "What does that look like to you?" He pointed with a gloved hand.

The other officer looked. "I should say," he said after a moment, "that we have found what we have been looking for, major."

"So would I. It's a little closer to our base than the radarmen calculated, but it certainly could have swerved after it dropped below the horizon. And we know there hasn't been another ship in this vicinity."

The captain was focusing a pair of powerful field glasses on the object. "That's it!" he said bridling his excitement. "Egg-shaped, and no sign of rocket exhausts. Big dent in one side."

Major Udovichenko had his own binoculars out. "It's as plain as day in this Earthlight. No sign of life, either. We shouldn't have any trouble." He lowered the binoculars and picked up a microphone to give the other nine moon-cats their instructions.

Eight of the vehicles stayed well back, ready to launch rockets directly at the fallen spacecraft if there were any sign of hostility, while two more crept carefully up on her.

They were less than a hundred and fifty yards away when the object they were heading for caught fire. The major braked his vehicle to a sudden halt and stared at the bright blaze that was growing and spreading over the metallic shape ahead. Bursts of flame sprayed out in every direction, the hot gases meeting no resistance from the near-vacuum into which they spread.

Major Udovichenko shouted orders into his microphone and gunned his own motor into life again. The caterpillar treads crunched against the lunar surface as both moon-cats wheeled about and fled. Four hundred yards from the blaze, they stopped again and watched.

By this time, the blaze had eaten away more than half of the hulk, and it was surrounded by a haze of smoke and hot gas that was spreading rapidly away from it. The flare of light far outshone the light reflected from the sun by the Earth overhead.

"Get those cameras going!" the major snapped. He knew that the eight moon-cats that formed the distant perimeter had been recording steadily, but he wanted close-ups, if possible.

None of the cameras got much of anything. The blaze didn't last long, fierce

as it was. When it finally died, and the smoke particles settled slowly to the lunar surface, there was only a blackened spot where the bulk of a spaceship had been.

"Well ... I ... will ... be—," said Major Valentin Udovichenko.

The TV debate was over. The senator and the President had gone at each other hot and heavy, hammer and tongs, with the senator clearly emerging as the victor. But no mention whatever had been made of the Soviet announcement from Luna.

At four thirty-five the next morning, the telephone rang in the senator's suite. Cannon had been waiting for it, and he was quick to answer.

The face that appeared on the screen was that of the President of the United States. "Your scheme worked, senator," he said without preamble. There was an aloofness, a coolness in his voice. Which was only natural, considering the heat of the debate the previous evening.

"I'm glad to hear it, Mr. President," the senator said, with only a hair less coolness. "What happened?"

"Your surmise that the Soviet officials did not realize the potential of the new craft was apparently correct," the President said. "General Thayer had already sent another ship in to rescue the crew of the disabled vessel, staying low, below the horizon of the Russian radar. The disabled ship had had some trouble with its drive mechanism; it would never have deliberately exposed itself to Russian detection. General Thayer had already asked my permission to destroy the disabled vessel rather than let the Soviets get their hands on it, and, but for your suggestion, I would have given him a go-ahead.

"But making a replica of the ship in plastic was less than a two-hour job. The materials were at hand; a special foam plastic is used as insulation from the chill of the lunar substrata. The foam plastic was impregnated with ammonium nitrate and foamed up with pure oxygen; since it is catalyst-setting, that could be done at low temperatures. The outside of the form was covered with metallized plastic, also impregnated with ammonium nitrate. I understand that the thing burned like unconfined gunpowder after it was planted in the path of the Soviet moon-cats and set off. The Soviet vehicles are on their way back to their base now."

After a moment's hesitation, he went on: "Senator, in spite of our political differences, I want to say that I appreciate a man who can put his country's welfare ahead of his political ambitions."

"Thank you, Mr. President. That is a compliment I appreciate and accept. But I want you to know that the notion of decoying them away with an inflammable plastic replica was not my idea; it was Matt Fisher's."

"Oh? My compliments to Mr. Fisher." He smiled then. It was obviously forced, but, just as obviously, there was sincerity behind it. "I hope the best team wins. But if it does not, I am secure in the knowledge that the second best team is

quite competent.''

Firmly repressing a desire to say, I am sorry that I don't feel any such security myself, Cannon merely said: ''Thank you again, Mr. President.''

When the connection was cut, Cannon grinned at Matthew Fisher. ''That's it. We've saved a ship. It can be repaired where it is without a fleet of Soviet mooncats prowling around and interfering. And we've scotched any attempts at propagandizing that the Soviets may have had in mind.'' He chuckled. ''I'd like to have seen their faces when that thing started to burn in a vacuum. And I'd like to see the reports that are being flashed back and forth between Moscow and Soviet Moon Base One.''

''I wasn't so much worried about the loss of the disabled ship as the way we'd lose it,'' Matthew Fisher said.

''The Soviets getting it?'' Cannon asked. ''We didn't have to worry about that. You heard him say that Thayer was going to destroy it.''

''That's exactly what I meant,'' said Fisher. ''How were we going to destroy it? TNT or dynamite or Radex-3 would have still left enough behind for a good Soviet team to make some kind of sense out of it—some kind of hint would be there, unless an awful lot of it were used. A fission or a thermonuclear bomb would have vaporized it, but that would have been a violation of the East-West Agreement. We'd be flatly in the wrong.''

Senator Cannon walked over to the sideboard and poured Scotch into two glasses. ''The way it stands now, the ship will at least be able to limp out of there before anyone in Moscow can figure out what happened and transmit orders back to Luna.'' He walked back with the glasses and handed one to Fisher. ''Let's have a drink and go to bed. We have to be in Philadelphia tomorrow, and I'm dead tired.''

''That's a pair of us,'' said Fisher, taking the glass.

Another month of campaigning, involving both televised and personal appearances, went by without unusual incidents. The prophets, seers, and pollsters were having themselves a grand time. Some of them—the predicting-by-past-performances men—were pointing out that only four Presidents had failed to succeed themselves when they ran for a second term: Martin Van Buren, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, and Herbert Hoover. They argued that this presaged little chance of success for Senator James Cannon. The pollsters said that their samplings had shown a strong leaning toward the President at first, but that eight weeks of campaigning had started a switch toward Cannon, and that the movement seemed to be accelerating. The antipollsters, as usual, simply smiled smugly and said: ''Remember Dewey in '48?''

Plays on Cannon's name had caught the popular fancy. The slogan ''Blast 'em With Cannon'' now appeared on every button worn by those who supported him—who called themselves ''Cannoneers.'' Their opponents sneeringly referred

to them as "Cannon fodder," and made jokes about "that big bore Cannon."

The latter joke was pure epithet, with no meaning behind it; when Senator James Cannon spoke, either in person or over the TV networks, even his opponents listened with grudging interest.

The less conservative newspapers couldn't resist the gag, either, and printed headlines on the order of CANNON FIRES BLAST AT FOREIGN POLICY, CANNON HOT OVER CIA ORDER, BUDGET BUREAU SHAKEN BY CANNON REPORT, and TREASURY IS LATEST CANNON TARGET.

The various newspaper columnists, expanding on the theme, made even more atrocious puns. When the senator praised his running mate, a columnist said that Fisher had been "Cannonized," and proceeded to call him "Saint" Matthew. The senator's ability to remember the names and faces of his constituents caused one pundit to remark that "it's a wise Cannon that knows its own fodder."

They whooped with joy when the senator's plane was delayed by bad weather; causing him to arrive several hours late to a bonfire rally in Texas. Only a strong headline writer could resist: CANNON MISSES FIRE!

As a result, the senator's name hit the headlines more frequently than his rival's did. And the laughter was with Cannon, not at him.

Nothing more was heard about the "mysterious craft" that the Soviet claimed to have shot down, except a terse report that said it had "probably been destroyed." It was impossible to know whether or not they had deduced what had happened, or whether they realized that the new craft was as maneuverable over the surface of the moon as a helicopter was over the surface of Earth.

Instead, the Sino-Soviet bloc had again shifted the world's attention to Africa. Like the Balkan States of nearly a century before, the small, independent nations that covered the still-dark continent were a continuing source of trouble. In spite of decades of "civilization," the thoughts and actions of the majority of Africans were still cast in the matrix of tribal taboos. The changes of government, the internal strife, and the petty brush wars between nations made Central and South America appear rigidly stable by comparison. It had been suggested that the revolutions in Africa occurred so often that only a tachometer could keep up with them.

If nothing else, the situation had succeeded in forcing the organization of a permanent UN police force; since back in 1960, there had not been a time when the UN Police were not needed somewhere in Africa.

In mid-October, a border dispute between North Uganda and South Uganda broke out, and within a week it looked as though the Commonwealth of Victorian Kenya, the Republic of Upper Tanganyika, and the Free and Independent Popular Monarchy of Ruanda-Urundi were all going to try to jump in and grab a piece of territory if possible.

The Soviet Representative to the United Nations charged that "this is a purely internal situation in Uganda, caused by imperialist agents provocateur financed by the Western Bloc." He insisted that UN intervention was unnecessary unless the "warmongering" neighbors of Uganda got into the scrap.

In a televised press interview, Vice Presidential Candidate Matthew Fisher was asked what he thought of the situation in East Africa.

"Both North and South Uganda," he said, "are communist controlled, but, like Yugoslavia, they have declared themselves independent of the masters at Moscow. If this conflict was stirred up by special agents—and I have no doubt that it was—those agents were Soviet, not Western agents. As far as the UN can be concerned, the Soviet Minister is correct, since the UN has recognized only the government of North Uganda as the government of all Uganda, and it is, therefore, a purely internal affair.

"The revolution—that is, partial revolution—which caused the division of Uganda a few years ago, was likewise due to Soviet intervention. They hoped to replace the independent communist government with one which would be, in effect, a puppet of the Kremlin. They failed. Now they are trying again.

"Legally, UN troops can only be sent there at the request of the Northern Uganda government. The Secretary General can send police troops there of his own accord only if another nation tries to invade Uganda.

"But—and here is the important point—if the Uganda government asks the aid of a friendly government to send troops, and if that friendly government complies with that request, that cannot be considered an invasion!"

Question from a reporter: "Do you believe that such intervention from another country will be requested by Uganda?"

"I do. And I am equally certain that the Soviet representative to the UN, and his Superiors in Moscow, will try to make a case of invasion and aggression out of it."

Within twenty-four hours after that interview, the government of North Uganda requested aid from Victorian Kenya, and a huge contingent of Kenyan troops marched across the border to help the North Uganda army. And the Soviet representative insisted that the UN send in troops to stop the "imperialist aggression" of Victorian Kenya. The rigidly pro-Western VK government protested that the Sino-Soviet accusations were invalid, and then asked, on its own accord, that a UN contingent be sent in to arbitrate and act as observers and umpires.

"Win one, lose one," Matthew Fisher said privately to Senator Cannon. "Uganda will come out of this with a pro-Western government, but it might not be too stable. The whole African situation is unstable. Mathematically, it has to be."

"How's that?" Senator Cannon asked.

"Do you know the Richardson-Gordon Equations?" Fisher asked.

"No. I'm not much of a mathematician," Cannon admitted. "What do they have to do with this?"

"They were originally proposed by Lewis Richardson, the English mathematician, and later refined by G. R. Gordon. Basically, they deal with the causes of war, and they show that a conglomeration of small states is less stable than a few large ones. In an arms race, there is a kind of positive feedback that eventually destroys the system, and the more active small units there are, the sooner the system reaches the destruction point."

Senator Cannon chuckled. "Any practical politician could have told them that, but I'm glad to hear that a mathematical tool to work on the problem has been devised. Maybe one of these days we won't have to be rule-of-thumb empiricists."

"Let's hope so," said Matt Fisher.

By the end of October, nearly two weeks from Election Day, the decision had been made. There were still a few Americans who hadn't made up their minds yet, but not enough to change the election results, even if they had voted as a bloc for one side or the other. The change from the shouting and arguing of mid-summer was apparent to anyone who knew what he was looking for. In the bars and restaurants, in the subways and buses, aboard planes and ships and trains, most Americans apparently seemed to have forgotten that there was a national election coming up, much to the surprise of Europeans and Asians who were not familiar with the dynamics of American political thought. If a foreigner brought the subject up, the average American would give his views in a calm manner, as though the thing were already settled, but there was far more discussion of the relative merits of the horses running at Pimlico or the rise in Lunar Developments Preferred than there was of the election. There were still a few people wearing campaign buttons, but most people didn't bother pinning them on after the suit came back from the cleaners.

A more detailed analysis would have shown that this calmness was of two types. The first, by far in the majority, was the calmness of the complacent knowledge of victory. The second was the resignation to loss manifested by those who knew they were backing the wrong man, but who, because of party loyalty or intellectual conviction or just plain stubbornness, would back him.

When Senator Cannon's brother, Dr. Frank Hewlitt Cannon, took a short leave of absence from Mayo Clinic to fly to the senator's campaign headquarters, there was a flurry of speculation about the possibility of his being appointed Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, but the flurry didn't amount to much. If President Cannon wanted to appoint his brother, that was all right with the voters.

After a tirade by the Soviet Premier, charging that the UN Police troops in Victorian Kenya were "tools of Yankee aggressionists," Americans smiled grimly

and said, in effect: "Just wait 'til Cannon gets in—he'll show 'em."

Election Day came with the inevitability of death and taxes. The polling booths opened first on the East Coast, and people began filing in to take their turns at the machines. By the time the polls opened in Nome, Alaska, six hours later, the trend was obvious. All but two of the New England states were strongly for Cannon. New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia, and Ohio dropped into his pocket like ripe apples. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida did the same. Alabama wavered at first, but tagged weakly along. Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan trooped in like trained seals.

In Mississippi, things looked bad. Arkansas and Louisiana were uncertain. But the pro-Cannon vote in Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Minnesota left no doubt about the outcome in those states. North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas—all Cannon by vast majorities.

And so the returns came in, following the sun across the continent. By the time California had reported three-fourths of its votes, it was all over but the jubilation. Nothing but an honest-to-God, genuine, Joshua-stopping-the-sun type of miracle could have saved the opposition. And such was not forthcoming.

At Cannon's campaign headquarters, a television screen was blaring to unhearing ears, merely adding to the din that was going on in the meeting hall. The party workhorses and the volunteers who had drummed for Cannon since the convention were repeating the scene that had taken place after Cannon's nomination in the summer, with an even greater note of triumph.

In Cannon's suite, six floors above, there was less noise, but only because there were fewer people.

"Hey!" Cannon yelled good-naturedly. "Lay off! Any more slaps on my back, and I'm going to be the first President since Franklin Roosevelt to go to my Inauguration in a wheelchair! Lay off, will you?"

"A drink, a drink, we got to have a drink," chanted Representative Edwin Matson, his bulldog face spread wide in a happy grin while he did things with bottles, ice, and glasses. "A drink, a drink—"

Governor Harold Spanding's lantern-jawed face looked as idiotically happy as Matson's, but he was quieter about it. Verbally, that is. It was he who had been pounding Cannon on the back, and now he was pounding Matthew Fisher almost as hard.

Matt Fisher finally managed to grab his hand, and he started pumping it. "What about you, Harry? I'm only a poor, simple Vice President. You got re-elected governor!"

Dr. Frank Cannon, looking like an older, balder edition of his brother, was smiling, too, but there was a troubled look in his eyes even as he congratulated the senator. Congressman Matson, passing out the drinks, handed the first one to

the senator.

"Have a drink, Mr. President! You're going to have to make a speech pretty soon; you'll need a bracer!" He handed the second one to the physician. "Here you go, Doc! Congratulations! It isn't everyone who's got a President in the family!" Then his perceptive brain noticed something in the doctor's expression. "Hey," he said, more softly, "what's the trouble? You look as though you expected sickness in the family."

The doctor grinned quickly. "Not unless it's my own. I'm used to worrying about a patient's health, not a Presidential election. I'm afraid my stomach's a little queasy. Wait just a second; I've got some pills in my little black bag. Got pills in there for all ailments. Find out if anyone else needs resuscitation, will you?" Drink in hand, he went toward the closet, where his little black bag was stashed.

"Excitement," said Senator Cannon. "Frank isn't used to politics."

Matson chuckled. "Do him good to see how the other half lives." He walked off, bearing drinks for the others. Governor Spanding grabbed one and came over to the senator. "Jim! Ready to tear up your capitulation speech now?"

Cannon glanced at his watch. "Almost. The polls closed in Nome just ten minutes ago. We'll wait for the President's acknowledgment of defeat before we go downstairs." He glanced at his brother, who was washing something down with water.

Behind him, he heard Matson's voice saying: "I'm sure glad Horvin isn't here! I can hear him now: 'Image! Image! That's what won the election! Image!'" Matson guffawed. "Jim Cannon was winning elections by landslides before he ever heard of Horvin! Jim Cannon projects his own image."

"Sure he does," Matt Fisher said, "but what about me?"

"You? Hah! You're tops, Matt. Once a man gets to know you, he can see that, if he's got any brains."

Fisher chuckled gently. "Ed, you've got what it takes to be a politician, all right."

"So do you, Mr. Vice President! So do you! Hey!" He turned quickly. "We got to have a toast! Doc, you're his brother. I think the honor should be yours."

Dr. Frank Cannon, looking much more chipper since swallowing the pills, beamed and nodded at his brother. "It will be a pleasure. Gentlemen, come to attention, if you will." They did, grinning at first, then forcing solemnity into their expressions.

"Gentlemen," said. Dr. Cannon gravely, "I give you my brother, Senator James Harrington Cannon, the next President of the United States!"

"To the President!" said Governor Spanding.

"To the President!" chorused the others.

Glasses clinked and men drank solemnly.

Then, before anyone else could say anything, Dr. Cannon said: "I further propose, gentlemen, that we drink to the man who will spend the next four years in the White House—God willing—in the hope that his ability to handle that high office will be equal to the task before him, and that he will prove worthy of the trust placed in him by those who had faith in that ability."

"Amen," said Congressman Matson softly.

And they all drank again.

Senator Cannon said: "I thank you, gentlemen. I—"

But, at that moment, the ubiquitous clatter of noise from the television abruptly changed tenor. They all turned to look.

"... And gentlemen," the announcer's voice was saying, "The President of the United States!"

The Presidential Seal which had been pictured on the screen faded suddenly, to be replaced by the face of the President. He looked firmly resigned, but neither haggard, tired, defeated, nor unhappy. To the five men who stood watching him in that room, it was obvious that the speech to come was on tape.

The President smiled wanly. "Fellow Americans," he began, "as your President, I wish both to congratulate you and thank you. As free citizens of a free country, exercising your franchise of the ballot to determine the men and women who are to represent and lead you during their coming terms of office, you have made your decision. You have considered well the qualifications of those men and women, and you have considered well the problems that will face our country as a whole and each individual as a free citizen desiring to remain free, and you have made your choice accordingly, as is your right and duty. For that, I congratulate you."

He paused for a dramatic moment.

"The decision, I think, was not an easy one. The citizens of our great democracy are not sheep, to be led first this way and then that; they are not dead leaves to be carried by every vagrant breeze that blows; they are not children, nor are they fools."

He looked searchingly from the screen, as though to see into the minds of every person watching.

"Do not mistake my meaning," he said levelly. "I do not mean that there are no fools among us. There are." Again he paused for effect. "Every man, every woman, who, through laziness or neglect or complacency, failed to make his desire known at the polls in this election—is a fool. Every citizen who thinks that his vote doesn't count for much, and therefore fails to register that vote—is a fool. Every person who accepts the privileges of American citizenship and considers

them as rights, and who neglects the duties of citizenship because they are tiresome—is a fool."

He waited for half a second.

"Fortunately for us all, the fools are in a minority in our country. This election shows that. Most of you have done your duty and followed your conscience as you see fit. And I congratulate you for that."

The smile became less broad—by just the right amount.

"Four years ago, exercising that same privilege and duty, you, the citizens of the United States, honored me and those who were working with me by electing us to the highest offices in this nation. You elected us, I believe, because we made certain promises to you—solemn promises that were made in our platform four years ago."

He took a deep breath and folded his hands below his chin.

"I am certain that you all know we have endeavored to keep those promises. I am certain that you know that we have kept faith with the people of this nation."

He looked down for a moment, then looked up again.

"This year, in our platform, we made more promises. We outlined a program that we felt would be of the greatest benefit to this nation." He unclasped his hands and spread them with an open gesture.

"Senator James Cannon and his party have also made promises—promises which, I am sure, they, too, feel are best for our nation."

Another pause.

"You, the citizens of the United States, have, in the past few months, carefully weighed these promises against one another—weighing not only the promises themselves, but the integrity and the ability of the men who made them.

"And you have made your choice.

"I cannot, and do not, quarrel with that choice. It is the essence of democratic government that disagreements in the upper echelons of that government shall be resolved by the action and the will of the governed. You, the people of the United States, have done just that.

"And—for that, I thank you."

A final hesitation.

"Next January, Senator James Harrington Cannon will be inaugurated as President of the United States. Let us show him, and the men who are to work with him, that we, as citizens of this great nation, resolving our differences, will strive unceasingly under his administration to further the high resolves and great ideals of our country.

"I believe—I know—that you are all with me in this resolution, and, for that,

too,—

"—I thank you."

The face of the President of the United States faded from the screen.

After a few seconds, Matson sighed. "Not bad at all, really," he said, stepping over to shut off the set. "He's been taking lessons from you, Jim. But he just hasn't quite got it."

Senator Cannon took another swallow of his drink and said nothing.

"Sincerity," said Governor Spanding. "That's what's lacking. He hasn't got it, and the voters can feel it."

"He managed to be elected President of the United States on it," Senator Cannon said dryly.

Spanding didn't turn to look at Cannon; he kept looking at the dead TV screen. "These things always show up by comparison, Jim. In comparison with some of us—most of us, in fact—he looks pretty good. I've known him since he was a fresh junior senator, and I was just attorney for the House Committee for Legislative Oversight." He turned around. "You know what, Jim? When I first heard him talk, I actually thought about changing parties. Yeah. Really." He turned around again.

"But," he went on, "he's all hot air and no ability. Just like Matt, here, is all ability and no hot air. No offense meant, Matt, believe me," he added, glancing at Fisher.

"I know," Fisher said quietly.

Spanding turned around once more and looked Cannon squarely in the eyes. "You've got both, Jim. The blarney to put yourself over, and the ability to back it up. And you know I'm not trying to flatter you when I say that."

When Cannon nodded wordlessly, Spanding gave himself a short, embarrassed laugh. "Ah, Hell. I talk too much." And he took a hefty slug of his drink.

Matthew Fisher took the overcharge out of the sudden outburst of emotion by saying: "It's more than just ability and sincerity, Harry. There's determination and honesty, too."

Matson said, "Amen to that."

Dr. Frank Cannon was just standing there, looking at his brother. There was a definite look of respect on his face.

Senator Cannon said: "You're all great guys—thanks. But I've got to get downstairs and make a speech. Ed, get the recording tape out of that set; I want to make some notes on what he said. And hurry it up, we haven't got too long."

"No canned speech for you, eh, Jim?" Spanding said.

"Amen to that, too," said Representative Matson as he opened the panel in the side of the TV set.

From a hundred thousand loudspeakers all over the United States, from the rockbound coast of Maine to the equally rockbound coast of Alaska, from the sun-washed coast of Florida to the ditto coast of Hawaii, the immortal voice of Bing Crosby, preserved forever in an electronic pattern made from a decades-old recording, told of a desire for a White Christmas. It was a voice and a tune and a lyric that aroused nostalgia even in the hearts of Floridians and Californians and Hawaiians who had never seen snow in their lives.

The other carols rang out, too—"Silent Night," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," "O Little Town of Bethlehem," and all the others. All over the nation, in millions upon millions of Christian homes, the faithful prepared to celebrate the birth, the coming, of their Saviour, Who had come to bring peace on Earth to men.

And in millions of other American homes, the Children of Abraham celebrated the Festival of Lights—Chanukah, the Dedication—the giving of thanks for the Blessing of God upon the priestly family of the Maccabees, who, twenty-odd centuries before, had taken up arms against the tyranny of a dynasty which had banned the worship of Almighty God, and who, by winning, had made themselves a symbol forever of the moral struggle against the forces that oppress the free mind of Man.

The newspapers and television newscasts were full of the age-old "human interest stories" which, in spite of their predictability—the abandoned baby, the dying child, the wretchedly ill oldster—still brought a tear to the eye during the Holiday Season.

As President-elect Cannon slowly made his cabinet appointments, the announcements appeared, but there was hardly any discussion of them, much less any hue and cry.

One editorial writer did make a comment: "It is encouraging to see that President-elect Cannon consults with Vice-President-elect Matthew Fisher regularly and frequently as the appointments are made. For a good many years, ever since the Eisenhower Administration, back in the Fifties, it has been the policy of most of our Chief Executives to make sure that the Vice President is groomed to take over smoothly if anything should happen to the President. Senator Cannon, however, is, as far as we know, the first President-elect who has begun this grooming before the Inauguration. This, in our opinion, shows both wisdom and political astuteness."

By the second week of the New Year, the new Cabinet had been picked. Contrary to the rumors before the election, the senator's brother had not been selected for any post whatever, but the men who were picked for Cabinet posts were certainly of high caliber. The United States Senate had confirmed them all before Inauguration Day.

That day was clear and cold in Washington. After the seemingly endless ceremonies and ceremonials, after the Inaugural Ball, and the Inaugural Supper, and the Inaugural Et Cetera, President James Cannon went to bed, complaining of a "slight headache".

"Frankly," he told Vice President Matthew Fisher, "it is a real head-splitter." He took four aspirin and went to bed.

He said he felt "a little better" the next day.

The fifth of February.

Ten forty-eight in the evening.

The White House, Washington, D.C.

Dr. Frank Hewlitt Cannon stood in a darkened bedroom in Blair House, across the street from the Executive Mansion, nervously looking out the window, at the big white house across the way. He was not nervous for himself, although he had plenty of reason to be. He was clad in pajamas, as his brother had ordered, and had even taken the extra precaution of rumpling up his hair.

He looked at his watch, and then looked back at the White House.

How long? he thought. How long?

He looked at his wrist again. The sweep hand only moved when he looked at it, apparently. He dropped his hands and clasped them behind his back. How long before he would know?

My kid brother, he thought. I could always outthink him and outfight him. But he's got something I haven't got. He's stuck to his guns and fought hard all these years. I couldn't do what he's doing tonight, and I know it. You're a better man than I am, kid.

Across Pennsylvania Avenue, Senator James Cannon was doing some heavy consideration, too. He sat on the edge of his bed and looked at the small tubular device in his hand.

Will Frank be safe? That's the only weak point in the plan.

Frank was safe. He had to be. Frank hadn't been over from Blair House in three days. They hadn't even seen each other in three days. The Secret Service men—

He threw a glance toward the door that led from his bedroom to the hall.

The Secret Service agents would know that Frank couldn't possibly have had anything to do with it. The only possible connection would be the hypogun itself. He looked at the little gadget. Hell, he thought; now or never.

He got up and strode purposefully into the bathroom. He smiled crookedly at his own reflection in the mirror. It was damnably difficult for a President to outwit his own bodyguard.

Get on with it!

He swallowed the capsule Frank had given him. Then, placing the muzzle against the precise spots Frank had shown him, James Cannon pulled the trigger. Once ... twice ... thrice ...

Against each nerve center in his left side. Fine.

Now that it was done, all fear—all trepidation—left Senator James Cannon. Now there was no way to go but ahead.

First, the hypogun that had blown the drug into his body. Two minutes to get rid of that, for that was the only thing that could tie Frank in to the plan.

They had already agreed that there was no way to get rid of it. It couldn't be destroyed or thrown away. There was only one way that it could be taken from the White House ...

Cannon left his fingerprints on it, dropped it into the wastebasket, and covered it with tissue paper. Then he left the bathroom and walked toward the hall door. Beyond it, he knew, were the guarding Secret Service men.

And already his left side was beginning to feel odd.

He walked to the door and opened it. He had a scowl on his face.

"Hello, Jenkins—Grossman," he said, as the two men turned. "I've got a hell of a headache again. Aspirin doesn't seem to help, and I can't get any sleep." He looked rather dazed, as though he wasn't sure of his surroundings. He smiled lopsidedly. "Call Frank, over at Blair House, will you? Hurry?" Then he swallowed, looked dazed, and fell to the floor in a heap.

The two Secret Service men didn't move, but they shouted loudly. Their orders were to guard the body of the President—literally! Until it was declared legally dead, that body was their responsibility.

The other Secret Service men in the White House came on the run. Within one minute after Cannon had fallen, a call had gone to Blair House, asking for the President's brother.

Inside of another two minutes, Dr. Frank Cannon was coming through the front door of the Executive Mansion. In spite of the chill outside, he was wearing only a topcoat over his pajamas.

"What happened?" he snapped, with the authority that only a physician can muster. "Where is he?"

He heard the story on the way to the President's room. Jenkins and Grossman were still standing over the fallen Chief Executive. "We haven't moved him, except to make him more comfortable," said Grossman. "He's still O.K.... I mean, he's breathing, and his heart's still going. But we didn't want to move him—"

"Fine!" snapped the doctor. "Best thing." He knelt over his brother and picked up his wrist. "Have you called anyone else?" he asked sharply while he felt the pulse.

"The Naval Hospital," said another agent. "They're coming fast!"

"Fine!" repeated Dr. Frank. By this time, most of the White House staff was awake. Frank Cannon let go the wrist and stood up quickly. "Can't tell for sure, but it looks like a slight stroke. Excuse me."

He went into the Executive bedroom, and on into the bathroom. He closed the door. Quickly, he fished the hypogun out of the wastebasket and dropped it into the little black bag which he had carried with him. He came out with a glass of water. Everything was taken care of.

PRESIDENT SUFFERS STROKE!

JHC Taken To US Naval Hospital

In Washington After Stroke In White House

All over the world, headlines and newscasts in a hundred tongues carried the story. And from all over the world came messages of sympathy and concern for the stricken Chief Executive. From England, simultaneous messages arrived from the Sovereign and the Prime Minister; from France, notes from both the President and the Premier of the Seventh Republic; from Ethiopia, condolences from His Imperial Majesty and from the Chief Executive. The United German Federation, the Constitutional Kingdom of Spain, the Republic of Italy, the United Austro-Yugoslavian Commonwealth, and the Polish Free State all sent rush radiograms. So did Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. From Africa, Australia, Southern Asia, Oceania, and Central America came expressive words of sorrow. Special blessings were sent by His Holiness from Vatican City, by the Patriarch of Istanbul, and by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Presidente of the Estados Unidos Mexicanos personally took a plane to Washington, as did the Governor General of Canada, carrying a personal message from the Prime Minister. Even the Soviet Union sent a radiogram, and the story of the tragedy was printed in Pravda, accompanied by an editorial that almost approached straight reporting.

President James Harrington Cannon knew none of this. He was unconscious and unable to receive visitors.

As far as actual news from the White House was concerned, news commentator Barton Wayne gave the best summary over a major American TV network on the morning of the sixth of February:

"Last night, at approximately eleven p.m., James Harrington Cannon, President of the United States, collapsed at the feet of the Secret Service men who were guarding him. Within a few minutes, Dr. Frank Hewlitt Cannon, the President's brother, called by the Secret Service in obedience to the President's last conscious words, had arrived from Blair House, where he had been staying.

"Dr. Frank Cannon diagnosed the President's illness as a—quote—slight stroke—unquote. Later, after the President had been taken to the Naval Hospital

for further diagnosis, Dr. Cannon released a statement. Quote—further tests have enabled the medical staff of this hospital to make a more detailed analysis. Apparently, the President has suffered a slight cerebral hemorrhage which has, temporarily at least, partially paralyzed the muscles of his left side. The President, however, has regained consciousness, and his life is in no danger—Unquote.

"After only sixteen days in the White House, the President has fallen ill. We can only wish him Godspeed and an early recovery."

Dr. Frank Cannon stood firmly by his brother's bedside, shaking his head firmly. "No, commander; I cannot permit that. I am in charge of this case, and I shall remain in charge of it until my patient tells me otherwise."

The graying Navy medical officer pursed his lips. "In cases of this sort, doctor," he said primly, "the Navy is in charge. The patient is, after all, the President of the United States."

Dr. Frank went right on shaking his head. "Cuts no ice, commander. I was specifically summoned by the patient. I agreed to take the case. I will be most happy to accept your co-operation; I welcome your advice and aid; but I will not allow my patient to be taken from my charge."

"It is hardly considered proper for the physician in charge of a serious case to be a relative of the patient."

"Possibly. But it is neither unethical nor illegal." He gave the commander a dry smile. "I know my brother, commander. Quite well. I also know that you have the authority and the means to expel me from this hospital." The smile became positively icy. "And, in view of the former, I should not advise you to exercise the latter."

The commander wet his lips. "I have no intention of doing so, doctor," he said rather huffily. "But, inasmuch as the X rays show no—"

There came a mumble from the man on the bed, and, in that instant, both men forgot their differences and became physicians again, as they focused their attention on the patient.

President Cannon was blinking his eyes groggily. Or, rather, eye. The left one refused to do more than show a faint flicker of the lid.

"Hullo, Jamie," Dr. Frank said gently. "How d'you feel?" It took nerves of steel to show that tender composure. The drug should wear off quickly, but if Jim Cannon's mind was still fuzzy, and he said the wrong thing—

For a moment, the President said nothing as he tried to focus his right eye.

"Don't try to move, Mr. President," said the Navy doctor softly.

President Cannon smiled lopsidedly, the left side of his face refusing to make the effort. "Arright," he said, in a low, blurred voice. "Wha' happen', Frang?"

"Apparently," said Dr. Frank carefully, "you've had a little bit of a stroke,

kid. Nothing to worry about. How do you feel?''

''Funny. Li'l dizzy. Don't hurt, though.''

''Good. Fine. You'll be O.K. shortly.''

The President's voice became stronger. ''I'm glad you're here, Frank. Tell me—is it ... bad?''

'''Tain't good, kid,'' Dr. Frank said with a bedside grin. ''You can't expect a stroke to put you in the best of health, now, can you?''

The lopsided smile came back. ''Guess not.'' The smile went away, to be replaced by a puzzled frown. ''My whole left side feels dead. What's the matter?''

Instead of answering, Dr. Frank Cannon turned to the Navy medic. ''I'll let the commander explain that. What's your diagnosis, doctor?''

The commander ran his tongue nervously over his lips before speaking. ''There's apparently a small blood clot in the brain, Mr. President, interfering with the functioning of the efferent nerves.''

''Permanent?''

''We don't know yet, sir. We hope not.''

President Cannon sighed. ''Well. Thank you, commander. And now, if you don't mind, I'd like to speak to my brother—alone.''

The commander glanced at Dr. Frank, then back at the President. ''Certainly, sir.'' He turned to leave.

''Just a moment, commander,'' Dr. Frank said. ''There'll be news reporters out there. Tell them—'' He frowned a little. ''Tell them that the President is conscious and quite rational, but that there is still some weakness. I don't think anything more than that will be necessary.''

''I agree. Certainly, doctor.'' At the door, the commander paused and said: ''I'll keep everyone out until you call.''

''Thanks,'' said Dr. Frank as the door closed behind the Navy man.

As soon as it closed, President Cannon struggled to get up.

''Don't try it, kid,'' the doctor said, ''those muscles are paralyzed, even if you aren't sick. Here, let me help you.''

''How did it come off?'' Cannon asked as his brother propped him up.

''Perfectly. No one doubts that it's a stroke. Now what?''

''Give me a cigarette.''

''All right, but watch it. Use your right hand, and smoke with the right side of your mouth. Here.'' The doctor lit a cigarette and handed it to his brother. ''Now, what's the next step?''

''The next step is to tell Matthew Fisher,'' said the President.

Dr. Frank Cannon scowled. ''Why? Why not just go through with the thing

and let him be fooled along with the rest? It seems to me he'd be ... well, more secure in his own position if he didn't know."

"No." The President hunched himself up on his pillows. "Can't you raise the head of this bed?"

Dr. Frank touched a button on the bedside panel, and the upper portion of the bed rose smoothly at an angle. "Better?"

"Fine. Much better."

"You were saying—"

"Yeah. About Matt Fisher. He has to know. He'll guess eventually, in the next four years, anyway—unless I hide away somewhere. And I have no intention of doing that.

"Oh, I'm not trying to show Matt what a great guy I am, Frank. You know better than that, and so will he. But Matt will have to have all the facts at hand, if he's to do his job right, and it seems to me that this is a pretty important fact. What do you say, Frank?"

The doctor nodded slowly. "I think you know more about the situation than I do. And I trust your judgment, kid. And Matt's, too, I guess."

"No." President Cannon's voice was firm as he looked at his brother with one bright eye. "Don't trust Matt's judgment, because he doesn't have any."

Dr. Frank looked astonished. "Then what—?" He stopped.

"Matthew Fisher," said President Cannon authoritatively, "doesn't need judgment any more than you need instinct. No more so, and no less. I said he doesn't have any judgment, but that's not exactly true. He has it, but he only uses it for routine work, just as you or I use instinct. We can override our instinctive reactions when we have to. Matt can override his judgment when he has to.

"I don't pretend to know how Fisher's mind works. If I did, I wouldn't be doing this. But I do know that Matt Fisher—by some mental process I can't even fathom—almost invariably knows the right thing to do, and he knows it without using judgment."

"And you're still convinced that this is the only way out?" Dr. Frank asked. "Couldn't you stay in office and let him run things under cover?"

"We discussed all this months ago, Frank," Cannon said wearily. "My reasons remain the same. Matt couldn't possibly operate efficiently if he had to go through me every time. And I am human, too; I'd have a tendency to impose my own judgment on his decisions.

"No, Frank; this is the only way it can work. This country needs Matthew Fisher as President, but he could never have been elected. Now I've done my job; now it's time for me to get out of the way and turn the Presidency over to a man who can handle the office far better than any other man I know."

"You make him sound like some sort of superman," said Dr. Frank with a wry grin.

"Hell," said President Cannon, "you don't think I'd turn this job over to anything less, do you?" He chuckled. "Call him in, will you?"

PRESIDENT CANNON RESIGNS!

Ill Health Given As Reason;

Doctors Say Recovery

Unlikely In Near Future.

VP Fisher To Take Oath Tomorrow.